Interrogating White Culture, Colorblind Intersectionality, and Internalized Racial Superiority through Spatial Justice: A Qualitative Examination of White Grassroots Activists in Showing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ)

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Abstract

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White ways of understanding, perceiving, and knowing continue to be centered in the field of psychology, leaving a deficit of knowledge around effective antiracist pedagogy, research, and training. Although psychologists have a natural place in strengthening social justice initiatives to broader antiracist advocacy, the field has had a long history of perpetuating racism, racial discrimination, and human hierarchy in the United States. White Supremacy Culture, outdated professional socialization practices, and hostile training environments continue to lead to high attrition rates, racial trauma, and compounding mental health issues for BIPOC. Moreover, epistemic restrictions and the lack of precise guidelines on implementing antiracism practices remain barriers to advancing racial equity within the field. Using Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR), this study identified antiracist frameworks and guidelines that psychology training programs could construct from the experiences, motivations, and practices of White activists in Showing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ), one of the most visible racial justice organizations in the United States. Through semi-structured interviews with 14 SURJ activists, this study generated eight major domains with three to five themes per domain. Applying theoretical frameworks of Critical Whiteness Studies, White Supremacy Culture, and spatial justice, findings revealed the range of ways in which SURJ activists used spatial justice praxis or
counter-spaces against White Supremacy Culture to work through the barriers of being an effective White activist and to advance antiracism by finding their mutual interests, or personal stakes, in the racial justice movement. Implications for psychology training programs, study limitations, and future research directions are discussed.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

We live in a continuous White Supremacist state. In *The Racial Contract*, philosopher Charles Mills explains how this state operates:

One has an agreement to misinterpret the world. One learns to see the world wrongly, but with the assurance that this set of mistaken perceptions will be validated. The Racial Contract prescribes for its signatories an inverted epistemology, an epistemology of ignorance, a particular pattern of cognitive dysfunctions, producing the ironic outcome that Whites, in general, will be unable to understand the world they themselves have made (Mills, 2014, p. 18).

Mills’ book was published several decades ago. Yet, his arguments remain as timely as ever when race plays a critical role in shaping how people experience the world around them. Race determines humanity, privilege, and the boundary between life and death for individuals living in the United States. In recent years, national conversations around hate crimes, police brutality, domestic terrorism as well as education, wealth, and health disparities have left institutions, organizations, activists, and fields of study searching for ways to dismantle systemic racism (Grzanka et al., 2019; Coleman et al., 2020; Soto et al., 2021).

Following the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, scholars have argued that racist attitudes, beliefs, and stereotypes only became more coded in language, particularly in the liberal parts of the urban North where prejudice manifested in subtler forms than in the South (Kim, 1999; Bonilla-Silva & Ashe, 2014). Studies consistently reveal that racial attitudes among the public have not changed significantly since the Civil Rights era (Craig & Richeson, 2014; Munger & Seron, 2017), and Americans are no more optimistic about race relations than they were in decades past (Gallup, 2020).
However, the Summer of 2020 became a watershed moment for the world, with an unprecedented number of antiracist protests demanding justice for the murders of unarmed Black citizens by law enforcement (OHCHR, 2021). In particular, the brutal murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officers on May 25th 2020 sparked the largest nationwide demonstrations since the Civil Rights era, as upwards of 26 million people showed up to protest racism and police brutality in public spaces (Oladipo, 2023). Catalyzed by this moment, the United States underwent an intense reawakening of political discussions around racial injustice.

Based on a transformative vision of society, racial justice aims to eliminate racial inequity and to advance the collective liberation of all people. It envisions a world where Black Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) have the dignity, resources, power, and self-determination to live full lives (Bryson et al., 2022). In this study, I shall primarily use the term BIPOC rather than the term “minority” or “people of color” in order to underscore the severe levels of historical oppression against Black and Indigenous communities in the United States (i.e., over 400 years of enslavement and genocide). Black and Indigenous oppression allowed the nation to accrue free labor and capital, which eventually built the foundation of a White Supremacy society (Feagin, 2020). Additionally, I will capitalize White in order to highlight White as a racial group and to make visible the underlying mechanisms of White Supremacy. Not capitalizing White, while capitalizing BIPOC, risks reifying White as the universal standard and ignores the many ways that Whiteness functions in institutions, communities, and relationships.

After 2020, public opinion polls found that concerns about race relations reached a record high, with 48% of all racial/ethnic groups expressing concern about the extent of racism and hate crimes in society (Saad, 2022). In major cities, 54% of protestors identified as White, totaling
greater diversity among protestors than during the height of the Civil Rights Movement (Fisher, 2020). In subsequent years, major cities paid an unprecedented $80 million to protestors who were injured as a result of law enforcement’s actions (Oladipo, 2023). The U.S. Justice Department also issued an investigative report on First Amendment violations, racial discrimination, excessive/unlawful use of force, and a lack of accountability in the city of Minneapolis’ police department, which led to George Floyd’s murder and countless other injustices (U.S. DOJ, 2023). The report found that officers were only held accountable after public calls of outrage. In part, the 2020 mass turnout in White protest participation was due to racial justice organizations mobilizing White Americans to act in solidarity with BIPOC communities and to end their complicity with White Supremacy.

**White Supremacy**

While White Supremacy and Whiteness are interrelated concepts, they contain important distinctions. Whiteness encompasses the actions, beliefs, and social norms upholding a system of racial domination in society (Leonardo, 2009). While Whiteness can only be embodied and made visceral by White people, White Supremacy as an ideology and as a system of domination can be upheld by individuals of all races, including BIPOC, due to internalized racism or colonization. Additionally, Whiteness can be conceptualized as one mechanism or tool through which White Supremacy operates and is strengthened.

White Supremacy is based on the ideology that White people are inherently superior to those of all other races and have the right to dominate society across all settings (Ansley, 1997). The formation of White Supremacy is determined by the geographical, social, economic, and political forces in a given context or period (Omi & Winant, 2020). In recent years, the rise of global far-right movements illustrates the multi-faceted and nuanced manifestations that can fall
under the umbrella of White Supremacy. In Europe, ethno-nationalist and far-right movements have attempted to displace refugee and Muslim populations through conspiracy ideologies, such as the Great Replacement Theory which argues that White, Christian populations will be entirely replaced by non-European migrants. Such extremist ideas have started to influence American politics and education (Pilkington, 2022). White Supremacy includes not only nationalist hate groups but also the political, economic, and cultural systems in which Whites overwhelmingly control power, access, resources, and ingrained ideas about White superiority (Ansley, 1989).

In America, Whiteness has been defined by race and citizenship, with populations and perceptions of groups shaped by immigration policies and by definitions of who can become White (DeGenova, 2006). The evolution of the U.S. Census illustrates how identity and race are continually redefined under the logic of White Supremacy (Hattam, 2005). For instance, the Census did not differentiate between Whites and Mexicans in the 1800s; the latter was legally classified as White until 1930 when states passed laws applying Plessy v. Ferguson’s one-drop rule, requiring anyone, including Mexicans, with African ancestry to be classified as Black and further distinguishing between race and color (Gross, 2003). Despite optimistic projections by scholars that the U.S. majority population will comprise BIPOC in the future (U.S. Census, 2012), as long as White Supremacy exists, it is more likely that racial assimilation and shifting definitions of Whiteness will ensure that White remains the dominant race in Western society.

Moreover, while all non-Black groups experience different racialization processes, such experiences are primarily shaped around a narrow definition of “Whiteness” and “Blackness,” symbolizing a stark dichotomy of power in which Black subjugation is a necessary foundation to maintaining White power and privilege across generations (Chin et al., 2022). Non-Black communities of color, for instance, are structurally positioned to fit or maintain the rigid Black-
White binary. When new immigrants are perceived as economic or political threats, they are often positioned towards “Blackness” and conferred less privilege economically, politically, and culturally (Kim, 1999). The U.S. racial order continues to maintain White Supremacy and ingrained ideas about White superiority.

**White Supremacy and Psychology**

In the field of psychology, racial justice is a core principle guiding education, research, and practice. Although researchers have argued that psychologists have a natural place in strengthening social justice initiatives to broader antiracist advocacy (e.g., Smith & Redington, 2010), the field has had a long history of perpetuating racism, racial discrimination, and human hierarchy. Ratele and Malherbe (2020) have argued that psychology has more often played a passive role in the racial justice movement and even worked against antiracist progress, as was the case in colonial India, Nazi Germany, and apartheid South Africa (Dawes, 1985; Geuter, 1992; Hartnack, 1987). In 2021, following the resurgence of the racial justice movement, the American Psychological Association (APA) adopted a council resolution publicly apologizing to BIPOC communities for APA’s past and ongoing role in perpetuating racial inequity and White Supremacy practices. The resolution highlighted the field’s complicity in eugenics, intelligence measurement, racism in diagnosis and clinical practice, exclusion of BIPOC leadership, in addition to many more injustices. APA (2021) also proposed a second resolution committing themselves to dismantling systemic racism.

Despite these APA resolutions, the impact of Whiteness and White Supremacy continue to go unacknowledged in almost all curricula, research, training, and practice (Clark-Taylor, 2017; Wright et al., 2023). The dominance of White psychologists and White cultural norms remain major barriers to equity and inclusion for BIPOC in the field of psychology. In the United
States, approximately 81% of the psychology workforce is White. In contrast, Latinx comprise 8%, Black/African Americans comprise 5%, Asian Americans comprise 3%, and other groups comprise 3% of the field (APA, 2022). Moreover, the psychology workforce (approximately 16%) is significantly less diverse than the general doctoral profession (approximately 26% racial/ethnic diversity) (Callahan et al., 2018). Gatekeeping and outdated professional socialization practices embedded in White cultural standards are barriers, leading to high attrition rates and underrepresentation in the field for BIPOC (Soto et al., 2021). The majority of students of color also report experiencing unsafe and hostile training environments within their graduate programs (McCubbin et al., 2023). The underrepresentation of racial diversity is even more troublesome when considering the spike in community trauma during the Covid-19 pandemic. For instance, Asian and Black communities experienced a “dual pandemic” of racial violence targeting their communities (e.g., anti-Asian hate crimes rose to 189% in 2020) in addition to the pandemic health crisis (Lee & Waters, 2021).

One reason for this dearth in diversity may be rooted in the culture of the field. White ways of understanding, perceiving, and knowing continue to be centered in psychology, leaving a deficit of knowledge around effective antiracist pedagogy, research, and training (Bezrukova et al., 2016; McCubbin et al., 2023; Wright et al., 2023). Academia continues to perpetuate dominant White cultural standards and exclusionary practices (Soto et al., 2021). Although psychologists are tasked with facilitating multicultural and diversity trainings, their teaching of racism remains apolitical and ignores the reality of structural inequalities, neoliberal capitalism, and even community mental health issues (e.g., racial trauma) (Ratele & Malherbe, 2020). This is despite widespread evidence that discrimination and race-based traumatic stress are associated with a range of deteriorating mental health and academic outcomes (Carter et al., 2019; Chou et
al., 2012; Cokley et al., 2013; Pieterse et al., 2010; Lee & Waters, 2021). Instead, racism is often conceptualized as a matter of individual bias, group dynamics, or modality of self-improvement. Research on microaggressions reveal that most White mental health practitioners are ignorant about the harmful effects of racism and discrimination. In therapy, they may minimize or reenact the harms experienced by their BIPOC clients in society, leading to detrimental and irreversible mental health outcomes (Sue et al., 2022).

Moreover, epistemic restrictions and methodological fidelity circumvent the work and risk required for antiracism (Ratele & Malherbe, 2020). Curricula in psychology programs are taught from a Eurocentric positivist lens (Haynes, 2017). Positivism, rooted in the belief that science is solely based on empirical facts validated by White epistemic authority, often leads to the denial of marginalized groups’ lived experiences (Wright et al., 2023). There is also a lack of specific guidelines around how to implement antiracism within diversity training programs (Pieterse et al., 2010). Additionally, while cognitive learning may increase among White trainees, attitudinal/affective learning and enduring commitments to social justice are far more difficult to maintain (Bezrukova et al., 2016; Gushue et al., 2022). Even professionals who have sharpened their multicultural skills report feeling unprepared to engage in antiracist initiatives (Smith & Redington, 2010). Today, an antiracist psychology continues to be the exception rather than the norm (Ratele & Malherbe, 2020).

**Antiracism Initiatives outside Psychology**

Due to the hegemony of White Supremacy in the field, researchers argue that psychologists must confront Whiteness as a moral imperative and stop using Whiteness as the universal standard in research (Grzanka et al., 2019; Soto et al., 2021). Along with increasing the diversity of the psychology workforce, one of the most fundamental ways that psychologists can
foster systemic change is to actively turn White educators, clinicians, and students away from a lifelong experience of Whiteness and learn how to decenter internalized attitudes of racial superiority (Chin et al., 2022). Yet, the centrality of Whiteness as a system of oppression is not a new concept. With few exceptions (e.g., Blauner, 1989; Helms, 1990; Feagin, 2020), such as critical race theory (e.g., Bell, 2022; Crenshaw, 2010; Delgado & Stefancic, 2013), research has not focused on how White psychologists and trainees can navigate their own power and privilege in furtherance of racial equity and justice.

Antiracist initiatives outside the field of psychology may shed light on how to address this ethical dilemma. Combating racism, along with the tangible risks of participating in antiracist struggles, has always been led by grassroots activists and not psychologists (Ratele & Malherbe, 2020). In their qualitative study, Smith and Redington (2010) outlined how the experiences of White antiracist activists can advance the training of psychologists interested in applying a social justice framework. To that end, the current study extends the literature on antiracism by examining the experiences, motivations, and practices of White grassroots activists in a national organization called Showing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ). Founded in 2009 after the 2008 presidential election of Barack Obama and the significant backlash in violence against BIPOC communities, SURJ aims to “educate, organize, and mobilize White people to show up powerfully for racial justice and collective liberation” (SURJ, 2022a). While cross-racial solidarity is necessary to advance racial justice, this study focuses on White communities and their struggles to commit to racial equity. As White people in the United States comprise the majority (60.1%) of population and still hold vast gatekeeping power (e.g., as educators, politicians, psychologists), the racial justice movement would be incomplete without a deeper understanding of the antiracist struggles of White America.
Qualitative Inquiry and Researcher Positionality

While psychological science emphasizes quantitative research and objectivity, it is necessary to acknowledge that the lens through which we view our research is also shaped by our social identities, including those that place us in positions of privilege and power (Garcia-Vazquez et al., 2020). The history of psychology lies within the Europeanization of the West, where White men dominated the field’s formations, theories, and research methodologies (Helms, 2017). As a result, assumptions of objectivity, neutrality, and value-free science conflated White epistemology as the universal standard for all populations (McCubbin et al., 2023). Today, research continues to deemphasize issues of Whiteness; for instance, method courses rarely integrate critical theory and qualitative inquiry (Jordan, 2022). However, qualitative researchers argue that theory operates through all aspects of the research process, influencing us whether recognized or not (Collins & Stockton, 2018). In contrast to traditional quantitative methods, qualitative researchers advocate for theoretically-driven analytic scrutiny of the researcher’s positionality, epistemology, and biases (Eagly & Riger, 2014). Methodological rigor is thus tied to epistemological transparency and clarifying one’s theoretical orientation to credibility (Jordan, 2022).

Scholars note the challenges of White researchers conducting critical whiteness studies, pointing to the difficulty of transgressing epistemological Whiteness and tendencies to frame racism as a problem for the “other,” rather than as a symptom of Whiteness (Helms, 2017). As White scholars’ identities may hinder the rigor of scholarship undertaken within this topic, Helms (1993) emphasized the need for scholars of color to also critically study the subject matter. To that end, I begin by acknowledging my own positionality in a project about Whiteness and antiracist activism. I am a second-generation East Asian American, cisgender, able-bodied,
educated, middle-class, female doctoral candidate in an APA-accredited counseling psychology program. My proximity to Whiteness and White culture has fluctuated throughout my life but remains strong in my formal education and professional life. My lived experiences as a woman of color, navigating predominantly White institutions and spaces, deeply inform the way that I approach research and continuously shape my understanding of racial oppression and social justice. Yet, I am not fully immune to the effects of White Supremacy and racial conditioning in this society. While Whiteness is primarily expressed in White bodies, due to its ideological hold, all individuals are impacted and at risk of its reproduction (Jordan, 2022). To that end, the research team for this study comprised researchers who came from a diverse range of intersectional and educational backgrounds.

**Main Research Question**

The field of psychology continues to struggle with racial equity and to be influenced by ideologies rooted in White Supremacy. Diversity training programs have largely been ineffective in reducing prejudice and strengthening the antiracist development of trainees in enduring ways (Bezrukova et al., 2016; Gregus et al., 2020; Gushue et al., 2022; Smith & Trimble, 2016). There is also a dearth of literature on how psychologists can practically prepare trainees for antiracist work (Gantt et al., 2022). Antiracist activism is one avenue outside psychology that may shed light on the phenomenon of Whiteness and the harmful impact to BIPOC communities. To that end, what antiracist frameworks and guidelines can psychology training programs construct and adapt from the experiences, motivations, and practices of White grassroots activists in Showing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ)? Through in-depth interviews with SURJ activists, this study explored this question.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

In this chapter, I will summarize prior research relevant to this study to provide context for understanding the experiences, motivations, and practices of White racial justice activists in Showing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ). The first section will outline the invention of White as a racial category, alongside dimensions of Whiteness and colorblind intersectionality. I will address how colorblind intersectionality helps to uphold White Supremacy and the importance of an intersectional analysis when studying Whiteness. The second section will focus on activism, differentiating between the concepts of ally and antiracist. This section will also address intersectional motivations and relations between White and BIPOC activists. The third section will provide a brief history of the multicultural movement in psychology and research on diversity trainings; the current movement towards an antiracist psychology will also be reviewed. The fourth section will outline the history of the activist organization under this study, SURJ, examining its organizing principles, strategies, and values. The final section will introduce Critical Whiteness Studies, alongside White Supremacy Culture and the concept of counter-spaces, to discuss how they serve as theoretical foundations for this study. The specific aims of this study will then be presented.

Becoming a Race

The invention of White as a race occurred in tandem with the legal codification of African slavery. White as a racial category did not exist until the 1640s, when the Virginia Courts were presented with a case of three runaway indentured servants: an African American man named John Punch, a Scotsman, and a Dutchman. Although the servants ran away together, the Courts conferred separate punishments: John Punch was sentenced to lifetime enslavement,
while the other men were sentenced to four years of servitude and promised their freedom. Punch became the first official slave documented in the English colonies (Coates, 2003; Lopez, 2006).

Without using the term White, the Virginia Courts invented a legal privilege on the basis of skin color. After this legal decision, there became a clear shift in law, with English colonies considering race as a central factor in determining slave status. In subsequent decades, the idea of Whiteness and African slavery became increasingly racialized and legalized. Slave laws restricting African servants from becoming free were written with greater frequency and fortitude (Lopez, 2006). From this historical period, the construct of a White race was born.

**An organizing strategy.** In the United States, race has upheld dominant ideologies through both collective action and personal practices (Omi & Winant, 1993). Racial theorists have historically served the interests of the powerful, using racist ideologies to justify the rule of law (Beech, 2020). White had become an organizing term for the upper class during a time when indentured servants were organizing for their political rights. In order to divide populations with shared economic interests who posed a threat to their political power, the ruling class eliminated the prior categorization of nationality and grouped all immigrants from Western Europe into one legal category called White (Allen, 2014).

Material benefits started to become codified, including voting and property rights as well as job opportunities. Elites in Virginia offered poor Whites their freedom from indentured servitude as well as 50 acres of land for working as slave patrollers - an earlier form of modern policing (Beech, 2020). Culturally, White Europeans were positioned as separate, superior, and American compared to non-White groups (Allen, 2014). Grounded in theories, institutions, and politics, racism has been an enduring organizing strategy for the politically powerful and elite.

**Whiteness**
Racism is one mechanism for upholding White Supremacy but it is not all-encompassing like Whiteness. *Racism* is the institutional, interpersonal, and cultural subjugation of people based on assigned racial or racialized categories (Helms, 2017). *Whiteness* is the myriad of ways that White people engage with race, White emotions, White identity, and White privilege or the unearned advantages conferred to Whites (McIntosh, 2003). Whiteness has also been defined as the actions, beliefs, and social norms upholding a system of racial domination in society (Leonardo, 2009). This section will review three major mechanisms through which Whiteness operates: the White Racial Frame, White racial identity development, and White fragility regulatory response.

**The White Racial Frame.** Sociologist Joe Feagin coined the *White Racial Frame* to describe the creation of social reality for Whites that include “broad and persisting sets of racial stereotypes, prejudices, ideologies, images, interpretations and narratives, emotions, and reactions to language accents, as well as racialized inclinations to discriminate” (Feagin, 2020, p. 11). This frame includes thousands of stored “pieces” of cultural information passed along from one generation to the next that White communities have developed to legitimize patterns of violence and discriminatory practices towards BIPOC communities. Specifically, it includes a central subframe asserting positive views about White virtuousness, superiority, morality as well as negative subframes about racialized “others” or “anti-Other subframes.” The White Racial Frame is a key mechanism of White Supremacy and operates at the institutional, cultural, inter/intrapersonal, and subconscious levels. The frame is “so internalized, so submerged that it is never consciously considered or challenged by most Whites” (DiAngelo, 2018, p. 34).

**A backstage culture.** The White Racial Frame primarily operates through culture. Culture refers to the organization of communities with shared traditions, values, beliefs, knowledge,
morals, and habits acquired as members of society (Tylor, 1870). It can also be defined as “the collective programming of the mind” (Hofstede, 2003, p. 5). Like an iceberg, above the waterline are aspects of a culture which are explicit, visible, and easily taught. At the waterline is a transitional zone where there is an implicit understanding of culture norms. Below the waterline are hidden and intangible aspects of a culture, which are not directly taught but remain the most enduring and powerful characteristics shaping individuals’ worldviews (McGrath et al., 1992).

Feagin (2020) conceptualized a *backstage culture of racism*, where Whites learn to safely “perform” racism among other Whites throughout their lives. This backstage racism is perpetuated through highly “segregated and incestuous networks” including economic, political, professional, and religious exclusive circles. Picca and Feagin (2007) observed 626 White college students who journaled about racial events they witnessed on a daily basis and found that racist speech, jokes, and discriminatory actions were common among the most educated participants. Attempts to make friendships across racial lines were also rare. Upon reviewing their entries, participants expressed shock at the frequency and content of their own racism. In their qualitative study on White participants’ experiences of race and racism, Smith et al. (2008) also found that racist jokes and dehumanizing stereotypes were justified as “a matter of opinion and taste” that should not be challenged by other Whites.

Claiming to be antiracist while actively harboring racist attitudes is common among Whites due to socialization into backstage culture (Feagin, 2020). Functionally, the backstage relieves stress and tension, tests the water of a topic, strengthens White solidarity, and decreases accountability (Picca & Feagin, 2007). Due to backstage culture, overt racism is not necessary for racism to proliferate. It can be upheld by the most liberal Whites who claim to value racial equity in public but who fail to do the inner work of understanding how racism has seeped into
their own consciousness. This deep dissonance is critical to preserving White Supremacy and suggests there must be significant efforts in the transformation of White racial consciousness. In this study, I will use the White Racial Frame and backstage culture to understand participants’ experiences of racial awareness, dissonance, and consciousness.

**White racial identity.** *Racial identity* is the understanding of how race functions in the United States, how membership in a racial group impacts oneself, and how this understanding shapes views of others within and outside one’s racial group (Carter et al., 2020). Helms (1990) argues that all people share a sense of historical experience with their racial groups no matter how distinctive they may be as individuals. Group membership has been shown to be psychologically beneficial in many ways such as promoting feelings of acceptance, a sense of belonging, and a social system with expectations to follow (Stephan et al., 2016).

*White racial identity* theories initially emerged in the 1980s through the work of Rita Hardiman and Janet Helms who provided a framework to better understand the developmental process that Whites may experience. Helms (1990) argued that Whites must make intentional efforts to abandon racism in favor of a positive definition of Whiteness. However, this goal of a positive White identity has been critiqued as problematic for several reasons. First, White activists reported experiencing the goal of a positive identity as difficult, if not impossible (Malott et al., 2015). Activists perceived Whiteness as innately negative due to the history of White Supremacy and BIPOC dehumanization in the United States, leading to a rejection of a positive racial identity. Second, activists reported not experiencing the racial identity stages as linear but, rather, as cyclical and dialectical. Todd and Abrams (2011) recommend normalizing this dialectical process, whereby Whites must hold the tension of being in dominant positions while conducting antiracist work. They argue that engaging in this dialectical process is more
indicative of racial identity growth than moving through stages. Third, although Helms (1990) asserted that Whites can learn to avoid life options that require participation in racial oppression, every system in America is premised on racial hierarchies. As a result, White activists experienced this choice as unrealistic. Instead, they found it more productive to seek counter-spaces that were less oppressive, while attempting to eradicate racial oppression in those systems (Malott et al., 2015).

Although racial identity remains an important framework to understand White racial awareness, these models are limited to the general White population on which they were conceptualized. As I will discuss in later sections, the theory also lacks an intersectional analysis that could integrate a more nuanced, dialectic, and systemic framework of Whiteness. Overall, there is a need to further conceptualize the antiracist development of White activists who typically demonstrate a greater commitment to racial justice than non-activists. In this study, I will primarily refer to White identity as a socially dominant identity that is externally imposed on Whites and characterized by a shared experience of Whiteness.

**White fragility regulatory response.** Applying the framework of emotion regulation theory (Gross, 2015), Ford and colleagues (2022) conceptualized the *White fragility regulatory response*. This concept refers to instances where a White person’s racial identity becomes salient and their fundamental goal of being a “good” person is perceived to be compromised, resulting in defensive maneuvers and sudden, intense emotions called *White fragility* (DiAngelo, 2018). Researchers argue that all Whites are susceptible to moments of fragility due to White socialization and the range of social situations that can evoke fragility (DiAngelo, 2018; Ford et al., 2022). Because Whites are conditioned to perceive themselves as raceless and to remain blind as to how race structures social institutions (Bonilla-Silva & Ashe, 2014), when the topic
of race does arise, it often results in discomfort, denial, and defensiveness (DiAngelo, 2018). While all people can exhibit emotional fragility, only White people can engage in White fragility due to their dominant positioning in society. Ford et al. (2022) argue that White fragility unfolds over time and moves through a cyclical process involving four core elements:

The emotion begins with a *situation*, which can be external (in the world) or internal (in one’s mind). A person *attends to* the situation and then *appraises* the situation in reference to their goals. This evaluation sets the stage for an emotional *response* that prepares the person to act [defensively or non-defensively] in the situation (p. 512).

Defensive reactions around race are often reinforced because they temporarily relieve uncomfortable emotions for Whites (Ford et al., 2022). However, this defensiveness prevents White people from receiving constructive feedback on the consequences of their reactions and from strengthening their racial stamina over the long term. Moreover, emotional and intellectual resistance against learning about the true history of BIPOC dehumanization and racial oppression is common due to guilt, shame, and miseducation around U.S.-American identity (Browne, 2008). In this way, White fragility maintains intersecting systems of inequity through the silencing and oppression of BIPOC and the prioritization of White comfort, convenience, and control instead. Understanding how White activists regulate and disrupt White fragility responses through psychological tools remains a novel area to understand.

**Colorblind Intersectionality**

Scholars have used *intersectionality* as a theory, an analytical framework, and a method to examine how intersections of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, legal status, and other categories of identity are linked to structures of inequality, producing different life experiences and forms of privilege or oppression (Cho et al., 2013; Choo & Ferree, 2010; Crenshaw, 1991).
Legal scholar Kimberle Crenshaw (1991) introduced the concept of intersectionality to illustrate how women of color experience multiple forms of oppression through their gender and race, in contrast to men of color or White women. Although psychology has primarily used intersectionality as a means to study oppressed groups, scholars have recently critiqued its narrow application and lack of analysis to patterns of social change impacting all social actors (Nash, 2008; Grzanka, 2020; Kowal et al., 2013). The misuse of intersectionality has also been criticized for producing performative “identity-based politics” in research, with a myopic focus on the narrow interests of certain groups at the expense of broader coalition-building (Wadsworth, 2011).

*Colorblind intersectionality* specifically refers to the lack of intersectional critique around White identity and invisibility of Whiteness in scholarship (Carbado, 2013). Colorblindness is the unawareness of racism or the belief that racial differences are irrelevant because racial equity has been achieved in modern society (Neville et al., 2013). It is also a race-specific indicator of system justification ideology, which reinforces the hierarchical order of society (Blackmon et al., 2019; Jordan, 2022). By framing Whiteness as outside of any intersectional lens, scholars reify colorblindness and fail to explore how individuals may be motivated by social issues related to their shared identities. Indeed, research on collective action reveals that identity-based movements have the potential to effectively build intersectional coalitions (Adam, 2017; Carastathis, 2013; Roberts & Jesudaon, 2013; Wadsworth, 2011). In the same way that racism and antiracism are intertwined processes, it will be critical to examine privilege and oppression as co-constituted (Kowal et al., 2013). Although some identities can alter over time and contexts (e.g., social class), in this study, I will define identity-based issues as those that are connected to
status-based identities that are externally imposed and characterized by shared grievances (Bernstein, 2005).

As the 2020 racial justice movement encompassed the most diversity in terms of activist participation (Fisher, 2020), exploring White intersectional identities that are simultaneously privileged and stigmatized will be crucial to understanding identity-based motivations for racial justice. To that end, this section begins by shedding light on the intersections of White identity and their impact.

**Intersection of social class and Whiteness.** In the United States, residential redlining, housing segregation, mass incarceration, and state-sanctioned violence have been used to maintain class control for decades (Liu, 2017). Institutions and Supreme Court decisions ensured that social privileges, like land ownership and marriage, were restricted to populations that were phenotypically White (Molina, 2014; Omi & Winant, 2020). While there is some evidence of social mobility in the United States (e.g., Heath et al., 1992), there is more evidence against meritocracy. *Meritocracy* is the idea that advancement or opportunity in society is mostly based on individual merit (Boykin et al., 2020). It has also been defined as the mechanism that unequally transfers wealth from one generation to the next (Markovits, 2019). Compared to their Black counterparts, the poorest Whites in America have double the wealth and are more likely to be housed due to favorable lending policies designed by the federal government, G.I. Bill of Rights, and other historic policies explicitly designed to help White communities accrue capital (Katznelson, 2005; Phillips & Lowery, 2018). Meritocracy reinforces colorblind ideology by failing to account for the deep history of racial oppression and ongoing inequities in the United States. These inequities continue to hinder the advancement of BIPOC in many arenas of life,
including employment, housing, education, and the criminal justice system (Alexander, 2020; Rothstein, 2017; Weller & Hanks, 2018).

Moreover, equal opportunity and upward mobility have not characterized the lives of most Americans, including poor and working-class Whites (Isenberg, 2016). There is differential access to resources and power based on the intersecting effects of race and social class (Liu, 2011; Newitz & Wray, 2013). To understand such discrepancies, scholars sometimes discriminate between White privilege (i.e., advantages given to middle/upper class Whites) and White priority (i.e., psychological protections from identifying as White) (Sullivan, 2017). While poor and working-class Whites were historically folded into the White race, they have not necessarily benefited from White privilege in the same way that middle- and upper-class Whites have. For instance, most working-class White American families do not hold generational inheritance to assets and property and continue to work in poor conditions for subsistence-level wages (Bohonos, 2021). To better understand the impact of social class on White identity and the development of antiracist activism, this study will aim to explore this intersection.

**Intersection of gender and Whiteness.** Gender norms were historically created based on the concept of female inferiority and male superiority (McEvoy, 2021). The concept of marriage and the nuclear family, for example, were derived from the idea that women and children should be the legal property of men (Isenberg, 2016). Due to their experiences of gender oppression, women seem more likely than men to understand and empathize with racial oppression (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Spanierman et al., 2012). White women report greater awareness of White privilege (Pinterits et al., 2009) and openness to diversity (Singley & Sedlacek, 2009). Ellison et al. (2019) found that gender moderated the association between awareness of White privilege and openness to diversity, such that the association was positive and significant for women while negative and
nonsignificant for men. Cabrera (2014) theorizes that the intersection of Whiteness and maleness results in a “hyper-privilege” that typically blinds White men to other groups’ experiences.

However, Jardina (2019) found that White women were far more likely to identify as racially White than men. Most White American women vote for conservative and Republican political candidates; more than half voted for right-wing candidate Donald Trump in both 2016 and 2020 presidential elections (Jardina, 2019). Public opinion studies conducted during the women’s movement also reveal that women of color overall have a higher commitment to social justice values than White women (hooks, 1982; Mansbridge & Tate, 1992). Indeed, despite public displays of feminism (e.g., joining Women’s rights protests), married White women adopt the partisanship views of their husbands and are more supportive of traditional gender roles (Jardina, 2019). In a study with 296 White women, Tropp and Ulug (2019) discovered that engagement in antiracist activism was much lower compared to their intent to participate. Given these discrepant findings on gender and White identity, this study will examine this intersection to understand its impact on antiracism.

**Intersection of sexual orientation and Whiteness.** Scholars have theorized that having at least one minority identity can lead to a better understanding of racial oppression and that experiencing discrimination as a sexual minority can increase racial empathy (Croteau et al., 2002; Greenwood & Christian, 2008; Kleiman et al., 2015). Sexual minority refers to sexual orientation identities (e.g., lesbian, gay, bisexual, etc.) other than heterosexuality (Savin-Williams, 2001). In a study with 97 self-identified White heterosexual men and 83 self-identified White sexual minority participants, Kleiman et al. (2015) found that sexual minority men had significantly more racial empathy than their heterosexual counterparts.
However, other studies reveal that racism is common in predominantly White LGBTQ+ communities (Diaz & Ayala, 2001; Stevens, 2004; Parmenter et al., 2020). White sexual minorities, for example, report being extremely attuned to times when they could pass as heterosexual but rarely, if ever, reflected on their racial privilege (Han, 2007; Stevens, 2004). In fact, only a few White participants shared that deep exploration of their sexual minority status was instrumental to developing an understanding of their Whiteness (Croteau, 1999). Intersectional systems of oppression, such as monosexism (i.e., structural invalidation of bisexuality and other non-monosexual identities) and genderism (i.e., erasure of non-binary identities due to the belief that gender is binary) remain additional obstacles to the full inclusion of BIPOC sexual minorities (Ross et al., 2010). Petsko and Bodenhausen (2019) also found that men of color who were described as gay immediately became de-racialized (i.e., less representative of their race) and perceived as more affluent than heterosexual men of color by White participants, revealing the intersecting effects of race, sexual orientation, and social class as well as the continued dominance of Whiteness within marginalized spaces. The present study will consider the impact of these different intersections on antiracist activism.

**Intersection of ethnicity and Whiteness.** While race is often marked by phenotype (i.e., physical features), ethnicity refers to nationality, regional culture, ancestry, and language (Hunt et al., 2000). Being “ethnic” is arguably associated with how much a group can or cannot assimilate into Whiteness. Glazer and Moynihan (1970) describe how racial assimilation occurs as ethnic groups acculturate and enter the American political landscape, gaining sociopolitical benefits and upward mobility. Historically, the oppression of Italian, Irish, and Greek immigrants played an important role in their community activism until they were categorized as White and assimilated into Anglo-Saxon culture (Jardina, 2019). Public lynching was not confined to
African Americans but extended to non-White groups, such as Irish and Chinese immigrants (Wolters, 2004). Moreover, intergenerational family histories play an important role in shaping ethnic identity (Goldstein, 2017). Jewish communities, for example, describe experiencing a “double vision” due to their exclusion from “pure” Anglo-Saxon Whiteness and their marginalization as a religious group throughout history (Brodkin, 1998). In a qualitative study (Smith & Redington, 2010), one participant explained his family’s assimilation process into the White race as “having a history of your ancestors cashing in their chips and saying…let me join the White club…and you will be able to get all the goods and stuff” (p. 543). Given the nuanced link between ethnicity and White identity formation, understanding how individuals from ethnic groups negotiate their process of racial assimilation will be an important topic to examine.

**Intersection of religion and Whiteness.** In the United States, Christianity is the dominant religion, with Protestantism being its largest branch. According to Gallup (2022), approximately 81% of individuals in America believe in God or some type of higher power (Jones, 2022). Religion refers to an organized set of beliefs, behaviors, and rituals (Hodge, 2015). The belief in a Christian God can also be conceptualized as a cultural worldview built upon Western colonization. For example, chattel slavery was justified through Christian theology and paternalistic views that “childlike” slaves needed to be saved by a benevolent God (Hardeman et al., 1994; Cannon, 2008). This type of *White saviorism*, or a psychological stance towards White superiority, has historically been upheld by Anglo-Saxon religiosity (Aronson, 2017; Cole, 2012). In a study on anti-Black attitudes and White religiosity, Howard and Sommers (2017) found that exposure to subliminal images of White Jesus increased White participants’ anti-Black attitudes compared to images of Black Jesus. Yet, these participants did
not express anti-Black attitudes on their self-report measures, suggesting a hidden or underlying link between Christian imagery and White racism.

In contrast, in a qualitative study with 10 White activists, Malott et al. (2015) found that religious/spiritual values informed these activists and led them to honor values such as “justice,” “inclusion,” “compassion,” and “dignity of every person.” A quest orientation (i.e., deep, reflective religious journey) has also been negatively correlated with prejudice (Prosper et al., 2021), and higher racial identities have been positively linked to integrated religious orientations (Sciarrà & Gushue, 2003). Ideologies associated with religious conservatism, such as right-wing authoritarianism and political conservatism, have also been negatively linked to openness to diversity (Cokley et al., 2010). While there is extensive research on religiosity and White identity, its impact on antiracist activism has yet to be thoroughly examined.

**Intersection of age and Whiteness.** Qualitative studies on multicultural awareness reveal that early personal experiences with diversity are the most important factors in developing an understanding of and empathy for racial oppression (Atkins et al., 2017). Studies have found that social context exerts a stronger influence on prejudice with increasing age (Raabe & Beelmann, 2011). Compared to younger activists, there are higher levels of protest participation (Fisher et al., 2018) and racial awareness among adult activists (Carter et al., 2020; Malott et al., 2015). Such results align with multicultural research, which posits that the cognitively complex skills necessary for multicultural competence correlate with older age and life experience (King & Baxter Magolda, 2003). Among college students, Reason et al. (2005) found that certain learning experiences had a major impact on their antiracist development, including classes that increased their critical thinking around the construct of Whiteness, diverse living arrangements, diverse friendships, and the experience of being a visible “minority” in a BIPOC environment.
Students who exhibited more reflection on Whiteness also participated in racial justice actions with greater frequency and at higher levels (e.g., becoming a campus leader and advocating for equitable policies) (Reason et al., 2005). The intersection of age and White identity will be considered throughout this study.

In summary, based on the literature, it is likely that multiple sources of privilege and oppression as well as their compounding effects serve as catalysts for deeper critical reflection and action. To that end, the intersections of Whiteness will be an ongoing source of critical analyses in understanding the motivations, experiences, and practices of SURJ activists.

**Antiracist Activism**

Activism is a form of citizenship whereby people individually and collectively respond to critical social issues (Omoto et al., 2010). In turn, these actions generate social capital or bonds of trust among different groups (Putnam, 2000). Historic changes to laws, policies, and statutes have often been the result of grassroots activism and social movements working in solidarity. For example, the Civil Rights movement brought about legislation to end racial segregation, voter suppression, and discriminatory employment practices. Additionally, central to activism are the concepts of allyship, antiracism, and intersectional motivations. In this section, I shall review these concepts in addition to White and BIPOC relations within activist spaces.

**Allyship.** An *ally* has been defined as a role with certain characteristics, including the “recognition of oppression faced by groups other than one’s own, recognition of the privilege that comes with membership in a dominant group, active support of and effort to speak out for and stand up for others and work to change the status quo” (Roades & Mio, 2000, p. 65).

Inherent to the concept of allyship is an external orientation to do work on behalf of others. Smith et al. (2008) found that, although most Whites affirmed the existence of racism, it was
reinterpreted into a problem that remained outside the scope of their own lives and responsibilities. In Western society, allyship has been defined through neoliberalism (i.e., intersectional influence of capitalism and White Supremacy), reinforcing White ideologies of saviorism and racial superiority (Case & Ngo, 2017). This White savior industrial complex has encompassed Western society since the colonization of North America by English settlers (Aronson, 2017). Indeed, self-identified White allies frequently describe themselves as “helping” BIPOC, revealing a superior stance and lack of understanding around the negative costs of racism for White communities (Fazio, 2020).

Moreover, without proper motivation and preparation, White allies can end up doing more harm than good, such as silencing the ideas of BIPOC when disagreement arises (Edwards, 2007). In particular, false consciousness can be internalized by White activists if they understand their roles through neoliberalism. Psychological false consciousness refers to how people work against themselves and their collective interest by internalizing the viewpoint of those in power (Neville et al., 2005). It is one of the most powerful mechanisms through which the ruling class maintains the status quo and social hierarchy in any society. Neoliberal allyship then becomes an inconsistent and unreliable mechanism through which advantaged groups can either support or undermine the collective work of activism.

**Antiracism.** While the roles of ally and antiracist have been used interchangeably in the psychology literature, they contain important distinctions. Unlike an ally, an antiracist is someone who commits to the antiracist struggle and who actively works to combat the societal and institutional discrimination impeding social change and racial equity for all (LaCosse et al., 2023). Kendi (2016) defines an antiracist as “one who supports an antiracist policy through their actions or expressing an antiracist idea” (p. 15). Antiracism also differs from nonracist beliefs,
which are passively endorsed (LaCosse et al., 2023). Antiracism is thus an entirely radical approach that explicitly names the influence of White Supremacy and White power in upholding racist systems of domination (Weston, 2021).

*Antiracism activism* includes the internal work of undoing the structure of one’s racist socialization and the external work of aligning oneself with the goals of racial equity. Moreover, a central premise of antiracist activism is rooted in critical race theory’s concept of *interest convergence*, which maintains that advances in racial equity will only occur when these changes also benefit Whites (Bell, 1980; Harris, 2016). In other words, equitable advances for BIPOC must go one step further and benefit White communities in some way (Weston, 2021). Indeed, research has shown that when divergent groups align with one another and move in a consistent direction together over time, new patterns emerge that become increasingly resistant to change (Coleman, 2021). In this study, identifying the interest convergence of White activists will be critical to understanding their motivations within the racial justice movement.

**Intersectional motivations.** Building on interest convergence theory, research on intersectional mobilization processes has found that focusing on overlapping identities can cultivate solidarity across different identity categories (Roberts & Jesudason, 2013). In her study on college campus protests, Van Dyke (2003) found that political threats against different communities inspired cross-movement coalitions involving BIPOC, women, and LGBTQ+ student organizations. In a study surveying attendees at the major Resistance protests against the Trump administration in 2017, Fisher et al. (2018) discovered that the most common motivational factor for protest participation was “equality.” Data was collected in real-time on 1,263 participants at the 2017 Women’s March, March for Science, Climate March, and March for Racial Justice (Fisher et al., 2018). In March for Racial Justice, the highest motivational
values endorsed were equality, immigration, police brutality, and racial justice. However, upon further analysis, Fisher et al. (2018) found that patterns of intersectional motivation were not durable and there was no coherent intersectional movement emerging from the analysis.

In 2020, a range of predominantly White organizations (e.g., Indivisible; Sunrise Movement) encouraged their members to participate in the George Floyd protests, contributing to the largest and most diverse social movement in American history to date (Fisher & Rouse, 2022). An overwhelming majority (94%) of protestors reported antiracism as their primary motivator, while one-third of protestors reported other motivations such as women’s rights (39%), LGBTQ rights (36%), and immigration rights (29%). The 2020 protests held salience for groups concerned about ongoing racial injustice and mobilized new groups that could connect to overlapping issues around equality. As a result, the 2020 movement effectively built coalitions across a diverse range of identities, communities, and organizations. The durability of these intersectional motivations has yet to be thoroughly examined and remains a ripe area of study.

The current literature on antiracist activism reveals that activists often have primary and secondary motivations connected to their intersecting social identities. Scholars recommend further examining the link between participants’ motivations and the organizational coalitions that have played major roles in social movement building (Adam, 2017; Fisher et al., 2018; Van Dyke, 2003; Wang & Soule, 2016). To that end, identifying the range of intersectional motivations for White activists and the durability of these motivations are crucial topics to investigate.

**White and BIPOC relations.** Multiracial activist spaces seem to present a rare opportunity to form authentic and enduring cross-racial relations. Yet, studies illustrate that the centering of Whiteness and White emotions do not dissipate when White activists begin their
antiracist work (Smith & Redington, 2010; Weston, 2021). In a qualitative study with 22 BIPOC activists, Gorski and Erakat (2019) found that racism and oppression were recurring in racial justice organizations, such that BIPOC activists attributed their emotional burnout to working with White counterparts. Most White activists harbored unevolved and racist views, were unwilling to step up when needed, exhibited White fragility, and took credit for the work of activists of color. Additionally, Srivastava (2021) found that antiracist organizational efforts often used White feminist forms of therapy (e.g., "let's talk" approach, "personal is political"). In these spaces, the emotions of White women were centered. White middle-class values and ways of expressing emotions (e.g., crying in front of a group to showcase “vulnerability”) were commonly rewarded. These White cultural patterns silenced BIPOC and reinforced oppressive power relations. Examining the ways in which White activists can mitigate harm and strengthen coalitions with BIPOC through effective antiracist practices remains a critical area to investigate.

**Multicultural Training in Psychology**

**Brief history of multiculturalism.** Understanding the history of a profession is an important aspect in the training of future professionals. The discipline of counseling psychology is relatively new compared to other psychological disciplines, coming to fruition only in the last several decades. National attention to minority populations (e.g., women, LGBTQ, BIPOC) increased during the mid-1950s and gained momentum with the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and Supreme Court decisions such as *Brown v. Board of Education*, which ended “separate but equal” policies (Heppner et al., 2000). In the late 1960s, high rates of immigration and birth rates led to a significant growth in BIPOC populations. As the composition of America became more diverse, the need for mental health services increased (Heppner et al., 2000).
Counseling psychology emerged as a specialty field within the American Psychological Association (APA) in the 1940s. Although counseling psychology mostly focused on providing vocational guidance, the field’s growth was spurred by returning veterans from World War II who needed assistance with reentry and rehabilitation (Heppner et al., 2000). As the need for serving diverse populations grew, the field began to specialize in multicultural issues, such as microaggressions and culturally-adapted clinical interventions (Sue et al., 2022). Framed within the historical and political context of the United States, multiculturalism at that time referred to race, ethnicity, and culture. Diversity referred to dimensions of personal identity and individual differences (Arredondo et al., 1996). Since 1982, the APA and counseling associations have required all accredited psychology programs to include at least one multicultural course in their training curricula.

**Diversity training programs.** The effectiveness of diversity training programs in applied psychology has remained controversial. Diversity training refers to training that aims to increase awareness of racial, ethnic, and cultural differences and to build skills in promoting diversity and reducing prejudice. While some studies have shown that diversity trainings can increase cultural self-awareness and knowledge (e.g., Castillo et al., 2007), the majority of studies reveal unstable and inconsistent results. While trainees’ cognitive learning tends to increase and stabilize within experiential courses, attitudinal/affective learning and enduring commitments to social justice diminish over a longitudinal period (Bezrukova et al., 2016; Malott et al., 2021). The disconnect between cognitive and affective learning as well as inconsistent attitudes towards social justice are troublesome when considering the mental health needs of a diverse and global population (Smith & Trimble, 2016). Studies also reveal discrepant impacts, with White students benefiting the most from these trainings. In contrast, BIPOC students experience lower perceptions of
multicultural training and overall program climate (Chao et al., 2011; Gregus et al., 2020; Tomlinson-Clarke, 2013). Moreover, BIPOC students are frequently assigned to an informal role of “teacher” for their White peers, who are developmentally behind in terms of their racial awareness and identity development (Mwangi et al., 2018). Other studies reveal an alarming “backlash” effect over the long term, with a fifth of participants reporting increased levels of racial prejudice after diversity training is complete (Paradies et al., 2009; Trenerry et al., 2010). Moreover, the use of culture-specific knowledge about racial/ethnic groups has frequently been misused for professionally-endorsed stereotyping, compounding the racism experienced by BIPOC trainees and clients in society (Kowal et al., 2013; Tomlinson-Clarke, 2013).

There is a limited base of literature on effective race-based curricula, with a complete absence on the longitudinal effects of such training (Malott et al., 2021). Curricula based on cultural competency can also be seen as another form of White Supremacy, with implicit and explicit prioritizing of Anglo-Saxon models of authority within training models, therapeutic context, and mental health (McCubbin et al., 2023). Scholars note how White psychologists tend to favor the language of multiculturalism, thereby minimizing the “differential power of Whiteness” (Helms, 2017, p. 721). In research, racism is framed as a BIPOC issue rather than as a foundation of Whiteness (Helms, 2017, Sue, 2017). Moreover, psychology programs do not train students on how to become antiracist, decolonial, or liberated in terms of structural or systemic social issues (Wright et al., 2023). One reason may be due to the limited knowledge of educators themselves on how to apply multicultural constructs (Hays, 2020). In a meta-analysis of over 2,000 articles from 2015 to 2021, Gantt et al. (2022) found that the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (MSJCC), one of the most widely embraced multicultural frameworks, was superficially used as a brief reference and rarely utilized in depth
by psychologists. The lack of defined terms and specific training frameworks further makes it difficult to implement antiracist pedagogy effectively (Pieterse, 2009). Guidelines on teaching cultural competencies remain unspecified by the American Psychological Association. Overall, efforts to address systemic racism and White Supremacy in psychology training programs continue to be limited and ineffective.

**An Antiracist Psychology**

BIPOC psychologists have challenged APA practices which continue to rely on White Supremacy and WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic) theoretical foundations. Wright et al. (2023) argue that psychologists must critically interrogate the field’s unexamined culture, professional perspectives and practices, and non-inclusive paradigms that are steeped in positivist conceptions of psychological science. *Positivism* is the way that psychology legitimized itself as a scientific discipline; it asserts that science is solely based on empirical facts, rejecting all metaphysical assertions (Koops & Kessel, 2017). However, an inherent flaw with this approach lies in the unquestioning acceptance of certain research findings as universal truths - normalizing White ways of knowing, being, and doing while ignoring marginalized communities’ experiences (Wright et al., 2023). Furthermore, program curricula required for APA accreditation remains centered on Eurocentric positivist frameworks, while the scholarship and ideas of BIPOC psychologists are rarely integrated. A cursory audit of most graduate psychology programs reveals a heavy reliance on cisgender White male theorists as well as an overrepresentation of psychological science steeped in positivist and post-positivist methodologies (Wright et al., 2023).

Ratele and Malherbe (2020) frame an antiracist psychology as one that “seeks to bend psychology to the will of antiracism, and never vice-versa” (p. 299). An antiracist psychology is
also a “political imperative that holds individuals accountable to a collective project of liberation” and one that “rejects the notion that the psychologist is the Master Knower” (Ratele & Malherbe, 2020, p. 298). Grzanka and Cole (2021) argue that the field’s core values of “good” science, including Western-based epistemic and methodological limitations, have produced structural barriers to psychology that could advance the public good.

Like antiracist activism, deep-level structural changes must first take root through critical consciousness. Coined by Paulo Freire (1984), critical consciousness or conscientização means learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions and taking action against the oppressive elements of reality. Although critical consciousness was originally developed in reference to oppressed populations, it has also been applied to socially dominant groups (McWhirter & McWhirter, 2016; Tyler et al., 2020). Freire (1984) believed that striving for humanity required the changing of structures which dehumanize both the oppressed and the oppressor. To that end, developing critical consciousness seems vital for White psychologists, particularly in unraveling power dynamics at the societal, group, and individual levels. There is thus a need to further understand how White activists use critical consciousness around their own power and privilege, without adopting false consciousness.

In this section, I provided a brief history of the multicultural movement and diversity training programs in the field of psychology. I summarized the current movement towards an antiracist psychology and parallels to antiracist activism. In the next section, I will discuss the activist organization under this study, Showing Up for Racial Justice.

**Showing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ)**

SURJ is a national organization in America that aims to organize White communities to work for racial and economic justice. SURJ was founded in 2009, after the 2008 election of the
first Black President Barack Obama. Despite claims of a post-racial society, Obama’s election stirred deep and widespread fear among the political conservative elite (Mayer, 2016). After the election win, there was enormous backlash from the political right; racial hate groups rose to 755 percent in subsequent years (SPLC, 2019). The Department of Homeland Security’s Extremism and Radicalization Branch published a report warning that the 2008 Obama election and U.S. economic crisis would make White nationalism a greater security problem. The report warned that White Americans suffering economically would become most vulnerable to extremist recruitment (Benner, 2019). In recent years, the 2016 presidential election of right-wing politician Donald Trump, resurgence of White nationalism, and January 6th 2021 insurrection on Capitol Hill exemplify this drastic increase in right-wing political extremism.

**SURJ strategies.** SURJ is a counter response to powerful right-wing organizing. Answering the Black Liberation Movement’s call for White people to step up for racial justice in their own communities, White activists Pam McMichael and Carla Wallace co-founded SURJ in the South and expanded the organization through hundreds of statewide chapters. The chapters organize working groups to take collective action in political campaigns and racial justice projects at the local, state, and national levels. They also create community spaces to help process antiracist work for its membership. A few chapters work on educational policies and are active in school boards for K-12 students. As of 2023, SURJ has over 175 chapters and affiliates across the United States and Canada. According to its founders, SURJ is “an act of accountability that was long overdue” (SURJ, 2022).

**SURJ organizing principles.** Among its organizing principles, SURJ believes that “White silence is the greatest barrier to racial justice” and the responsibility to educate and organize White communities lay with White people. Its theory of change encompasses
delegitimizing racist institutions, fighting for a fair economy that refuses to pit communities against each other, and shifting culture (i.e., underlying beliefs that people have about others and the world) in a way that undermines support for systemic racism (Coalition of Anti-Racist Whites, 2020). SURJ is guided by the philosophy that education must be paired with action in order to be effective and that organizing must be done from a place of community and belonging for all people. Research on graduate-level race-based counseling courses reveal that White students recognize the difficulties of enacting antiracist work alone and the importance of being part of organizations proactively engaged with the work (Malott et al., 2019; Malott et al., 2021). SURJ also views racial justice as the cornerstone of inequality in society and as key to other social justice issues such as economic, gender, environmental, and disability justice.

**SURJ values.** Some of its organizational values include: a) calling people in, such as providing specific and direct feedback to activists when mistakes are made and allowing Whites to grow without a culture of shaming, b) accountability via collective action, including collaboration and partnership with BIPOC-led organizations, c) organizing out of mutual interest, such as identifying the gains that White communities have in racial justice, d) sharing resources and power, e) inclusive organizing of those with different backgrounds and political views, f) centering class, including understanding the ways that racism intersects with economic issues and creates divisions within White communities.

Although there are a few qualitative studies on White activists (e.g., Smith & Redington, 2010; Malott et al., 2015; Malott et al., 2019; Malott et al., 2021), none has focused specifically on the experiences of grassroots activists in SURJ statewide chapters across the United States. SURJ is the most visible predominantly White antiracist organization in recent years and the largest organizing project to mobilize White communities for racial justice in American history.
To that end, the current study presents a unique opportunity to understand the experiences of White activists working for antiracism at a national level. As this project was conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic and in the aftermath of George Floyd’s murder in 2020, this study also provides a chance to shed light on the psychology of White communities during a period when racial justice activism was erupting across the world.

**Theoretical Frameworks**

Critical Whiteness Studies, alongside tenets of White Supremacy Culture and counter-spaces, establish the theoretical frameworks used throughout this study. In this section, I will outline the frameworks and explain how they apply to this study.

**Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS).** Critical frameworks can assist in understanding the ways that race and White Supremacy impact different communities of people. *Critical Whiteness Studies* is an extension of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and rooted in the tradition of experiential knowledge and oppositional scholarship. Originating in the legal field in the 1970s, CRT is based on a movement of scholars and activists interested in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023). Critical theorists position race as a social construct that maintains hierarchies through the logic of White Supremacy (Beech, 2020). Activists expanded tenets of CRT to fields of study such as higher education and psychology. The development of CRT and its use in various fields has led to other extensions which allow for deeper examinations of specific communities including LatinxCrit, TribalCrit, AsianCrit, and Critical Whiteness Studies.

Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS) allows for a deeper critique of Whiteness, rather than a general examination of race and racism. A foundational distinction within CWS research is that Whiteness does not equal White people. Leonardo (2009) notes that “Whiteness is a racial
discourse, whereas the category ‘White people’ represents a socially constructed identity, usually based on skin color” (pp. 169–170). CWS aims to disrupt the normality of hegemonic Whiteness and how people come to internalize, embody, and enact White Supremacy (Applebaum, 2016). Although there are no tenets like in CRT, CWS is firmly rooted in the idea that Whiteness can “be broken and deconstructed for the betterment of humanity” through the use of tools, such as counter-narratives and counter-spaces (Nayak, 2007). While Whiteness is centered in society, it is not always critiqued. CWS offers a way to analyze the power of Whiteness through a critical lens (Matias & Mackey, 2016). Throughout this study, I will use CWS to critically investigate the normative ways that Whiteness is perpetuated and disrupted in antiracism.

White Supremacy Culture (WSC). Building on the White Racial Frame (Feagin, 2020), a more holistic framework to understand the White Racial Frame’s concept of “backstage culture” is through Tema Okun’s concept of White Supremacy Culture. Originally used to improve organizational workplaces by then-diversity consultant Okun and Jones (2000), the concept was used by racial justice activist groups in the 2000s to understand how White Supremacy operates and manifests in daily life, including in their own activism. Following George Floyd’s murder in 2020, WSC became widely circulated in the American public to understand the nuanced dimensions of racism within White culture.

White Supremacy Culture (WSC) refers to a system of characteristics used as cultural norms without being explicitly named by society. WSC can be exhibited by individuals of any background in ways that privilege the White dominant culture over other cultural understandings. Okun (2021) argues that WSC is “the water we swim...introduced by the power elite to hoard power and profit and to create disconnections that are grounded in a history” (p. 1). Key characteristics of WSC include: being driven by fear, obsessing over perfectionism,
believing there is only one right way, assuming that Whites are always qualified, thinking in
binary terms, valuing individualism over collectivism, valuing quantity over quality, engaging in
defensiveness and denial, believing that Whites always have the right to comfort, fearing open
conflict, power hoarding, paternalism, and having a constant sense of urgency (Okun, 2021). In
this study, I will specifically use White Supremacy Culture to underscore the nuanced barriers
and challenges to antiracist work for White activists.

**Counter-spaces.** In contrast to White Supremacy Culture, *counter-spaces* are non-
institutionalized spaces “where deficit notions of People of Color can be challenged” (Solorzano
et al., 2000, p. 70) and “a process whereby groups create temporary and partial milieus to
communicate and enact oppositional politics” (Hershkovitz, 1993; Dempsey et al., 2011, p. 205).
Based upon critical race theory, Brown and Pickerill (2009) conceptualized an activist counter-
space as comprising four dimensions: 1) *physical space* refers to the environment and setting, 2) *temporal space* refers to the mental space where connections can be made between history and
current events; also called the sociological imagination where individual issues are understood in
relation to broader sociopolitical contexts, timelines, and frameworks, 3) *intrapersonal space*
refers to spaces for self-reflection and healing; also called critical emotional reflexivity
(Zembylas, 2008), and 4) *interpersonal space* refers to spaces where collective solidarity and
communality can be created.

The defining characteristic that makes such spaces “counter” is the overwhelming sense
of *spatial justice* or “spaces of resistance” that reinhabit and destabilize dominant structures
through creative dialogue and strategies (hooks, 1982; Dempsey et al., 2011). Although spatial
justice has often been used to frame the resistance of marginalized populations (e.g., Schwartz,
2014; Freeman-Wong et al., 2022), counter-spaces can also be a key element in White antiracism
due to the ubiquitous nature of WSC and lack of cultural support for antiracist work in society. In this study, the understanding of spatial justice will include counter-spaces inside and outside of SURJ that stand in opposition to White Supremacy Culture. I will also refer to counter-spaces to examine how spatial justice and antiracist practices are utilized by SURJ activists.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I summarized the extant literature on the dimensions of Whiteness and intersectionality of White identity. I reviewed the literature on activism, focusing on allyship versus antiracism. I discussed the role of intersectional motivations in the racial justice movement and relations between White and BIPOC activists. I provided a brief history on multiculturalism and the efficacy of diversity training programs in psychology. The organization under this study, Showing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ), was briefly summarized. Last, I introduced Critical Whiteness Studies, alongside White Supremacy Culture and counter-spaces, as theoretical foundations for this study.

This chapter identified several gaps in the literature. While there is extensive literature on White racial identity and White fragility in psychology, this study incorporated White intersections and the White Racial Frame more thoroughly. Recent studies on using innovative psychological tools to manage White fragility have also not been applied to the activist or antiracism literature. In contrast to prior studies that conflated the concepts of ally and antiracist, this study differentiated between these roles. This study also attempted to identify the intersectional motivations of Whites and BIPOC, particularly the interest convergence of White activists. Furthermore, the limited research on antiracist training frameworks was reviewed and parallels between antiracist initiatives inside and outside of psychology were discussed.

The Current Study
Given the centrality of Whiteness in society, recentering White people in this study may seem antithetical to advancing antiracism. However, examining Whiteness through a critical framework stands in opposition to studying White hegemony without any criticality. Applying qualitative inquiry and critical theory, the results from this study may shed a light on how Whiteness and antiracism operate and how to implement enduring structural changes within antiracist activism and, by extension, psychology training programs. Specifically, the findings may provide frameworks and lessons for diversity training programs in their mission to implement effective antiracist teachings, training, and practices. Through critical consciousness and tools grounded in antiracism, White activists and psychologists can potentially move toward spaces of empowerment, justice, and liberation for all people (McCubbin et al., 2023).

The current study sought to discover antiracist frameworks that psychology training programs could construct and adapt from the experiences, motivations, and practices of SURJ activists. Only a few studies have deeply examined the inner experiences of White racial justice activists; none have studied SURJ grassroots activists across the United States. To that end, this study employed Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) methodology to answer the following research questions (Appendix A outlines the interview protocol):

1. What motivates SURJ activists to join the racial justice movement, and what keeps them committed over the long term?
2. How do SURJ activists conceptualize their relationship to WSC and the impact of Whiteness on their intersectional identities?
3. What are the biggest challenges to antiracist work for SURJ activists?
4. What counter-spaces (if any) do activists utilize inside and outside of SURJ?
5. How do SURJ activists understand their roles in the racial justice movement?
Chapter 3: Method

This chapter provides the rationale for using Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) in this study. It outlines participant recruitment, informed consent, data collection, data coding and analysis, and methods to ensure participant confidentiality as well as ethical considerations.

Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR)

CQR is a method for investigating complex social issues that are difficult to examine with standardized measures or quantitative approaches alone (Hill et al., 1997). Unlike quantitative research, CQR is built upon a constructivist framework that acknowledges the existence of multiple social realities. More prevalent in anthropological, sociological, and educational disciplines, qualitative methods have become more accepted within psychology, where researchers acknowledge its value in exploring variables that have yet to be identified or sufficiently operationalized (Morrow, 2007). Qualitative research reveals a picture of “what lies beneath” the surface of human experience (Haverkamp, 2005, p. 124) where the goal is to answer the what and how of participants’ experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Rather than one general result applying to a sample population, CQR acknowledges that participants have their own experiences, which may vary due to different intersecting identities and life backgrounds. When the literature does not offer a sound basis from which hypotheses can be tested and theories can be verified, qualitative research provides a mechanism to generate theory and produce relevant hypotheses (Ponterotto, 2005).

CQR underscores the use of a collaborative research team, a process of reaching group consensus, and a systematic way to analyze the results across cases. Specifically, CQR involves the use of: (a) semi-structured and open-ended interviews, allowing for the collection of consistent data across participants and in-depth examination of their lived experiences; (b) research members working on the analyses to foster multiple perspectives; (c) group consensus
about the meaning of data; (d) at least one external auditor to minimize the effects of groupthink (Hill et al., 2005, p. 196).

After interviews are conducted by the principal investigator, each research member analyzes the interview transcripts independently. Afterwards, each researcher explains and reviews their coding process with the group. Coding is the indexing or categorization of text to establish a thematic framework of manifest and latent meanings within the data (Saldana, 2021). Amongst the team, there should be a shared theoretical foundation based on fundamental principles of the study (e.g., basic understanding of race and racial justice). Team members may have different but not entirely disparate perspectives (e.g., disbelief that racism exists) (Hill et al., 2005). Furthermore, power differentials in the group will inevitably exist. To the extent possible, the principal investigator should ensure that members have an equal voice and strive to foster an environment where members can speak openly and honestly about different viewpoints and group dynamics. Overall, CQR necessitates an open exploration of ideas, a willingness to compromise, and an awareness of power dynamics so that each member’s voice is heard and valued (Hill et al., 1997).

The present study explores the experiences, motivations, and practices of White racial justice activists in the United States. CQR is well suited for this study as the method provides an in-depth exploration of these activists who are typically not well understood or studied in depth. Furthermore, CQR may allow participants to make greater meaning of their experiences and for the research team to connect ideas to new concepts (Hill et al., 2005).

**Participants**

The sample consisted of 14 adult participants. This sample size falls within the 10 to 15 participant range recommended by Hill et al. (2005). Participants ranged in age from 28 to 79.
years old, with a mean age of 45. All participants were born in the United States and identified as non-Latinx White. One participant identified as both multiracial and White. This participant was included in the sample due to their experiences as a White-passing person, with a strong family history of racial assimilation into Whiteness.

The sample consisted of 10 cisgender women, 1 cisgender man, 1 trans/genderqueer, and 2 genderqueer participants. Participants lived in the urban (n=10), suburban (n=4), and rural (n=1) areas. In terms of ethnicity, the sample identified as Western European (n=11), Eastern European (n=1), Jewish (n=3), and Syrian/Lebanese/Irish (n=1). For religious identification, participants identified as Atheist (n=3), Jewish (n=3), Christian (n=2), Catholic (n=1), Agnostic (n=3), secular Buddhist (n=1), and non-religious spiritual (n=2). For sexual orientation, participants identified as heterosexual (n=8), queer (n=1), pansexual (n=4), and bisexual (n=1). In terms of educational level, most participants (n=11) had postgraduate degrees (e.g., MA, MS, PhD, or MD), while remaining participants had a bachelor’s degree (n=1), some college (n=1), and some postgraduate work (n=1). Participants identified as middle class (n=6), upper middle class (n=5), and upper class (n=3). Although no one identified as poor or working class, a few participants reported social class mobility over their lifetimes and grew up in poor or working class families.

All participants self-identified as members, activists, or organizers in the national grassroots organization, Showing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ), for a minimum of two years. Participants had been active members of SURJ for three to eight years.

Procedures

Participant recruitment. Participants were recruited from December 12, 2021 to June 16, 2022. Permission to conduct research with human subjects was obtained through the
Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Teachers College, Columbia University. To recruit participants, a two-phase sampling approach was used.

Due to the phenomenological nature of the study and the challenge of finding activists beyond self-identification, participants were identified via purposive sampling (Hesse-Biber, 2017). Sampling procedures in qualitative research are criterion-based and purposeful; that is, participants are selected according to specific criteria corresponding to the research questions and potential to provide significant data (Morrow, 2005). Recruitment initially occurred through internet searches focusing on contact persons from SURJ. Potential participants received an email from the principal investigator detailing the purpose of the study and inviting them to participate. Additionally, snowball sampling (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981) was conducted. Snowball sampling is a technique that uses personal references to recruit participants and remains useful in contexts when potential participants are difficult to locate (Hesse-Biber, 2017). This method was applied through a few study participants and a research team member who had been a long-standing member of the SURJ New York City chapter.

The second phase of the recruitment process extended the sample by contacting official SURJ statewide chapters across the United States. An email was sent to the main contact address of several SURJ chapters, outlining the purpose of the study and asking chapter leadership to distribute study information. Approximately 20 participants were contacted in total, resulting in a final sample of 14 participants.

All participants were provided with an overview of the study and the principal investigator’s contact information. Interested individuals were encouraged to contact the investigator to set up a time to complete the interview. There was no financial compensation; almost all participants expressed that their involvement was part of their racial justice work.
Informed consent and confidentiality. During the informed consent process, all participants were informed of the purpose of the study, potential risks and benefits, the principal investigator’s contact information, and information related to the audio recording of their interviews. IRB contact information was provided in case participants had questions or concerns about the study. Consent was obtained both verbally and in writing. Upon entering the study, all participants were de-identified through a random number sequence. Their right to privacy was protected through confidential coding and secure data storage in a password-protected database. No one except the research team had access to recordings and transcripts.

Field setting. The field setting included zoom audio interviews. As the principal investigator was visibly an Asian American woman, eliminating the face-to-face component on zoom had the potential advantage of increasing honest responses among White participants. In particular, eliminating the video component seemed significant as this study was conducted during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, a time when anti-Asian hate crime and sentiment reached its peak in the United States. The principal investigator was, in a sense, “raceless” during the interviews. Research has also shown that telephone interviews can increase participants’ privacy and vulnerability, while face-to-face interviewing can lead to socially desirable answers (Hill et al., 2005).

Data collection. After it was determined that participants met criteria for study inclusion, arrangements were made to conduct the interview. The study was described to each participant as an “exploration of the experiences of White racial justice grassroots activists in America.” Participants consented to being audio recorded and were provided with an outline of procedures to protect their confidentiality. They were encouraged to contact the principal investigator by phone or email if they had any questions or wanted to withdraw from the study. No interviews
were withdrawn. However, four interviews were eliminated because participants were no longer active members of SURJ or members of a different racial justice organization.

**Instruments**

**Demographic questionnaire.** All interviews began with the completion of a demographic questionnaire (see Appendix B), which asked about the participant’s place of birth, age, racial/ethnic background, social class, family composition, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, and spiritual/religious orientation. Participants were asked to note how long they had been active members of SURJ, their past and current roles, projects they were involved in, and how they became a member of the organization.

**Interview protocol.** As recommended by Hill et al. (1997), the semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix A) was derived from an extensive review of the theoretical and empirical literature, research questions, and feedback from experienced qualitative researchers. Items were developed to elicit information about (a) participants’ experiences in SURJ, (b) early background and upbringing, (c) assumptions made in their lives about other racial groups and White people, (d) their initial awareness of being White, (e) challenging emotions they grappled with, (f) how Whiteness intersects with their identities and relationships, (g) what White Supremacy and antiracism mean to them, and (h) their motivations to continue antiracist work.

**Data Analysis**

**Methodology.** Interview transcripts were analyzed in the stages outlined by Hill et al. (2005): (1) domains (i.e., topics to cluster all data) were used to segment transcripts; (2) core ideas (i.e., summaries that capture the essence of what participants said) were used to abstract the interview data within domains; (3) cross-analysis (i.e., categories describing common themes reflected in the core ideas in each domain across cases) were used to construct themes across
participants; (4) an external auditor provided feedback at every stage; (5) results were depicted through categories; (6) data trustworthiness and accuracy were established.

CQR consists of limitations such as the lack of precise guidelines for some steps, difficulty in combining results across different studies, repetitive steps, and time commitment involved (Hill et al., 2005). Yet, CQR remains one of the most effective methods for conducting in-depth qualitative studies on the experiences of unexamined or unknown groups and is widely used in counseling psychology. It also allows researchers from different backgrounds to examine the same data and come to consensus about their meaning, reducing biases that can arise with one researcher (Hill et al., 2005).

Domain coding. The initial phase of data analysis included coding each transcribed interview response into domains, or topic areas. The team began this process by reviewing the interview protocol and brainstorming domain titles that participant responses could fit into. A review of the interview protocol and responses generated 12 domains, which became the initial domain list or “start list.” One interview was randomly chosen for each team member to independently read and code. Responses ranged from a few words to sentences and were labeled to identify each domain segment. Then, the team came to consensus about the best domain title that would fit each data section. The same process was conducted for a second interview, after which, both coded interviews and the start list were sent to the auditor. The auditor recommended combining domains to prevent “double coding,” resulting in eight major domains.

Developing core ideas. Following the domain coding process, the data content in each domain was summarized into accurate and succinct sentences for each interview. Hill et al. (2005) describes this stage as the process of capturing “the essence” of interviews. Each team member reviewed one interview and developed core ideas separately. Once the team developed
their core ideas for each domain within an interview, the team consolidated their core ideas until group consensus was reached. The auditor provided feedback on whether the core ideas were clear and did not interfere with the interview’s explicit meaning. The teams came to consensus about how to incorporate this feedback.

**Cross analysis.** The cross-analysis stage requires the research team to review data across multiple cases to locate common themes. At this stage, the data analysis moves to a broader level of abstraction. The team examines core ideas across all cases and categorizes similar ideas into new categories. Once categories are established and all data is placed into the corresponding categories, each category is given a frequency label. Hill et al. (2005) recommends using “general” for results that apply to all or nearly all cases, “typical” for results that apply to at least half of the cases, “variant” for results that apply to at least two but fewer than half of the cases, and “rare” for results that apply to one or none of the cases.

The current study had sufficient data as to not warrant a stability check. Stability checks have been deemed unnecessary by Hill et al. (2005), who instead emphasize that researchers should collect adequate sample sizes and present evidence of their trustworthiness in conducting data analysis (e.g., providing quotes, extended examples, documentation of procedures). Stability checks therefore serve as little more than confirmation of extant categories.

**Research Team**

The use of multiple researchers working both independently and collaboratively should increase the trustworthiness of the final themes (Reason et al., 2005). Five research team members and one external auditor were responsible for ensuring the integrity of all data. The auditor was a non-binary Asian doctoral candidate in an APA-accredited Counseling Psychology program who had extensive experience with CQR methodology and leading their own CQR
team. Although the auditor entered the process after each stage of data analysis, they were not otherwise involved in any aspect of the project.

The principal investigator led and managed all stages of the study. The investigator utilized two research teams, which she was both part of, to analyze different sets of transcripts during the domain and core idea stages. The first team consisted of a Black non-binary queer master’s student in counseling psychology and a Jewish White queer female graduate who was also an organizer in the SURJ New York City chapter. The second team consisted of a Black queer female master’s student in clinical psychology and a White non-binary queer graduate in the spirituality psychology program. Research team members were in their mid-20s to mid-30s.

Due to the timeline needed to complete this study, the teams were initially separated in order to work on the datasets more efficiently. Each team followed the same procedures, with the principal investigator involved at every stage. The first team reviewed the first seven transcripts, and the second team reviewed the remaining seven transcripts. The two teams were then combined and collaborated on the 14 transcripts during the cross-analysis stage. Organizing the teams in this manner was consulted on and approved by Clara Hill.

All members were trained in CQR methodology before working on this study. As recommended by Hill et al. (1997; 2005), teams first met to discuss their biases, assumptions, and expectations. Biases are often developed through personal experiences and must be brought to greater awareness so as to reduce the impact on data analysis (Hill et al., 2005). Team members discussed their affective reactions toward participants and engaged in a bracketing exercise to minimize the influence of their biases on results. Bracketing is the process by which an investigator uses self-reflection and reflexivity to identify, explore, and set aside (i.e., “bracket”) presuppositions they might have about the phenomenon being studied. This enables
the research team to maintain the focus of the study on the exploration of subjective experiences reported by participants (Constantine et al., 2008). Researchers also maintained reflexive journals that allowed for bracketing and the introspection necessary to ensure “goodness” in qualitative research (Arminio & Hultgren, 2002). The teams also discussed potential power differences in their identified groups (e.g., race, gender, educational status, social class) and attempted to cultivate an environment promoting respect and openness to feedback. The team had varying degrees of experience working as an organizer and/or activist, including the primary researcher who used to be an organizer. The effects of different identities among team members, especially race, were discussed.

Interrogating Whiteness in the psychological sciences is challenging due to the negative emotions that learning about Whiteness can evoke (Evans-Winters & Hines, 2020). Given that some of the researchers identified as White, the possibility of negative and defensive reactions by White members was made explicit from the start. White team members acknowledged their tendency to either over identify or be overly critical towards participants. Self-reflective journaling and bracketing exercises were recommended in case there were any intense or unexpected reactions. Overall, the research team expected the majority of participants to be less active in their racial justice activism than self-reported and less aware in their understanding of race and power, particularly in relation to BIPOC. They expected stories about White fragility and heroic allyship to be dominant narratives. BIPOC team members acknowledged the relations between their own communities (i.e., Black and Asian American) and commented on their complicated relationship with White people and White culture. In terms of group process, each team member took turns explaining their individual rationale of coding at each stage of data analysis. The principal investigator typically went last to mitigate differences in group power.
dynamics. When disagreements arose, the team openly and constructively discussed their disagreements until group consensus was reached.

**Research team positionalities.** To provide voice for the unique experiences of the research team, each team member was asked to describe their positionalities and experiences working on this project:

“As a gender queer, educated white person living in NYC, this research taught me that dismantling and deconstructing White Supremacy goes beyond confronting overt racism and advocating for policy changes. Confronting racism in oneself is a lifelong, intentional, and personal endeavor that doesn’t end when you leave your White community behind for a more diverse and politically active one. While doing this research, I considered my own upbringing in predominantly White neighborhoods in Ohio and took note of how White Supremacy Culture shaped me and created personal stakes in my activism. White Supremacy Culture extends even in seemingly progressive circles. This research has helped me be a little more reflexive to the subtleties of racism and how to better address them.”

“I am a Black woman and HBCU (Historically Black Colleges and Universities) graduate. To be transparent, I approached this project thinking I already had a complete understanding of whiteness. However, I did not have a complete understanding of what really constitutes antiracism. If you had asked me what separated acts of allyship from acts of antiracism, I would not have been able to conceptualize ideas of inner activism and white identity development. I was also surprised to find that many of our subjects felt shame about maintaining low levels of racial diversity in their lives.”

“CQR was a really affirming, fun experience. Working on a project that critically engaged with whiteness, led by a person of color, provided a chance to use the wisdom from my
communities, experiences, and classroom learning in ways that I seldom have the chance to in academia. Most of my life has been about moving beyond what is written and theorized by whiteness, engaging with ever-changing complexities and building on the rich work of BIPOC. CQR provided a way to do that in community, allowing for a layered richness of building on intersecting experiences and wisdoms in a consistent way. Having a team of critical folks with a range of racial and ethnic backgrounds was a joy. I looked forward to our meetings, even during a hectic time of my life. It was also lovely as a queer person of color, as a non-binary person, and as a person whose life has been heavily shaped by religion to engage with similar intersections and complexities in others’ stories. Loved this process!”

“This research experience was meaningful and generative for me as a white person who strives to practice antiracism and a member of a SURJ chapter. Our discussions brought clarity, complexity, and insights that have already affected how I approach relationships in my organizing community and life in general. As I identified so closely with the research subjects, the process challenged me. I often found myself worrying about being overly defensive or overly critical. I aimed to work toward balance through slow self-reflection, listening carefully to others, and engaging in dialogue. The specificity and nuances within our findings feel helpful in building a deeper understanding of white antiracism, which I hope can inform future developments of these collective practices.”
Chapter 4: Results

The present study explored the experiences, motivations, and practices of White racial justice activists in the United States, focusing on members of a national organization called Showing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ). To allow for individualized exploration of these issues, a Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) approach was used based on in-depth, semi-structured interviews of participants. In this chapter, I will outline the results of CQR data analyses and conclude with a prototypical portrait of a SURJ participant.

Based on 14 interviews, the data analysis yielded eight domains, with three to five categories characterizing each domain. The results with frequency labels are summarized in Table 1. Domain titles are highlighted in bold; categories (or themes) are highlighted in italics. Themes referring to 13-14 cases are labeled as general, 8-12 cases are labeled as typical, 2-7 cases are labeled as variant, and 1 case is labeled as rare. For the most part, participants reflected on their past experiences and accounts as White people; however, they noted how similar patterns have and still emerge in the present day. Several of the themes were also interconnected to some degree. Each theme is described and accompanied by examples using direct quotes from the interview transcripts.

Domain 1: Shame and Challenging Emotions

The first domain emerged from participants’ responses regarding emotions they initially experienced in their awareness of being White, feelings they grappled with the most in their racial journeys, and how they managed any intense emotions. Of the three categories in this domain, one was typical, one was variant, and one was rare.
**Typical theme.** Many participants reported *experiencing a cocktail of shame*, including complex emotions such as anxiety, guilt, embarrassment, despair, confusion, and anger. As exemplified by one participant:

I've gone through a pretty standard growth process. First, there is denial. Then, understanding the harm that White people can do. Then, feeling the shame and guilt around it. This is what we were onboarded into and rewarded for. I was rewarded my whole life for being a really good White person, right? Enlivening and embodying White culture was something I was heavily rewarded and accepted for. There is very little external reward for changing or challenging that.

Other participants disclosed their reactions upon realizing their default roles as White people in upholding racism. One participant expressed:

The shame is particularly attached to: Gosh, I didn't realize I was doing all this. I didn't realize this was what I was. I didn't realize I was enacting, enlivening, and embodying this whole agenda. I was a foot soldier for White Supremacy. Gosh, how stupid do I feel? And, oh shit, you mean I keep doing it even as I try not to do it?

**Variant theme.** A variant number of participants reported *using strong defense mechanisms to regain racial comfort* after experiencing a cocktail of shame. This ranged from disconnecting from their emotions to developing an eating disorder. For instance, one participant disclosed that: “Ignorance is a very powerful protection that White people use to defend themselves in the status quo; that's what I was doing.” A second participant described the effects of White socialization on her defense responses:
It’s a struggle to be connected to my emotions. To never want to bring up issues or be emotionally vulnerable. To not feel that I have a good way to handle conflict or my emotions. I think that is an aspect of White Supremacy Culture.

Another participant described her perceived struggle to retain any sense of control over her life as a White woman:

Moving through the world as a White person made me feel like I had the ability to control it because I was in a culture that made me feel like I had access to power and could get what I wanted. This was the first time where I couldn't. A lot of my fragility experiences came from internalizing a lack of control, internalizing that I couldn't make that difference. I developed an eating disorder that was about focusing my lack of control into somewhere where I felt like I could retain control over something.

**Rare theme.** One rare participant described *learning to process challenging emotions* through somatic exercises and self-regulation skills. For example:

Reading, journaling, and allowing myself the space to really feel and understand the functionality of those feelings. That would be the management of it. I have spent a lot of time working through my own trauma history and use somatic therapy techniques. I can handle my physical reactions to shame and discomfort pretty well.

**Domain 2: The Racist Backstage and Colorblind Frontstage**

The second domain emerged based on participants’ accounts of their upbringings and assumptions made throughout their lives about different racial groups, including other Whites.

Of the three categories in this domain, one was typical, one was variant, and one was rare.

**Typical theme.** It was typical for the majority of participants to have experienced *growing up in the racist backstage and performing in the colorblind frontstage.* This theme
emerged through participants’ growing awareness of the racism circulated within their White communities, while maintaining a facade of colorblindness in multiracial and public spaces. One participant noted how ingrained racist and anti-Black attitudes were in their communities:

Whenever my family would walk through downtown Atlanta, we would be escorted by police officers. White families would be escorted. I was told it was not safe because of all the violence in the area and all the poverty. My family associated that with Blackness. So I associated Blackness with aggression, with violence, with danger – even if this was never named.

Another participant described experiencing racial dissonance as a student:

We did the whole fuckin MLK history; seeing the videos of Black people getting sprayed [by White people] with hoses in the streets. In some way, you would think that I'd see that and realize like, oh, White people had power. Whiteness has power. But it was framed so that I never took it personally. I never connected it back to me.

**Variant theme.** Participants highlighted a variant tendency to engage in beliefs about *White exceptionalism*, leading to paternalism and saviorism behaviors. This pattern was exemplified by one participant: “I am prone to what Layla Saad calls White exceptionalism. For a while, I hid behind the idea that I understand things more than most White people so that’s good enough. Using that as an excuse to be complacent.”

Some participants also described how White exceptionalism was intricately tied to colonizing Anglo-Saxon religious beliefs. For instance: “My parents were devout Christians and saw this work as critical to their spiritual beliefs. I guess I went through some of that White savior complex stuff.”
Rare theme. One participant discussed having *politically active parents who never referenced race*:

My parents didn't talk about race. They just talked about how everyone is equal. We would go on hunger marches to advocate for people in other countries. Sometimes, we had Native American kids living with us. Not a lot of transparent conversations around that but acknowledgement that Indigenous folks had been mistreated (past tense), and they were living in impoverished communities because of that.

Domain 3: Finding Community in SURJ

The third domain emerged from descriptions about participants’ experiences in Showing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ) and what they learned in SURJ. Of the three categories in this domain, one was typical, one was variant, and one was rare.

**Typical theme.** A typical number of participants described the importance of SURJ as being a *structured space to gain community belonging*. One participant explained their growth as a White person and as an activist through this community space:

It was not until I found SURJ that there was a community of people who I felt I could work with, learn from, grow with, and support. An organized place to grow personally and feel like I was making a difference. Those public and private pieces really came together for me in SURJ. I've been able to grow so much more quickly and be much more effective in SURJ.

In contrast to predominantly White spaces outside of SURJ, one participant described the sense of belonging and optimism they experienced through their community relationships:

There's a strong tendency among White people to feel that the only kind of refuge from the ills of the world are individual relationships, never with people as a group. It's really
uplifting for me to do things with other people that are positive. It personally keeps me from sliding into complete nihilistic rage and depression.

**Variant theme.** Several participants shared that they learned how to *deconstruct Whiteness and become accountable* as a White person in SURJ. A few participants described projects within the organization that helped them deconstruct the origins and meaning of Whiteness. For instance, one participant worked on a historical ancestry project:

I’m calling on my ancestors and working to undo this culture that disconnects us from our history. Part of that is going back through ‘your people’; not necessarily blood and bone people. But returning and identifying when your people began identifying as White and what sacrifices or compromises they made to assimilate into Whiteness.

Unlike other predominant White spaces, participants articulated how a sense of responsibility and accountability was integrated into their lives in SURJ. As told by one participant:

Just knowing there’s an accountability there; that I have made a commitment and a promise to do this work with other people. Once you start, it’s easier to continue because you meet more people and get more involved. It becomes part of who you are as a person. It becomes more of my identity.

Another participant shared that they increased accountability in their relations with other White people: “Being White and what we need to do about that, or do with that, has become a central focus in my relationships with White folks and a primary form of connection.”

**Rare theme.** In contrast to the previous accounts, only one participant highlighted how antiracist community spaces like SURJ were *helpful but not fundamental* in advancing their racial justice work. Instead, this participant stressed the importance of doing deeper internal work and self-reflection: “Having people that I'm connected with who are going to check in on
me and having people that I'm checking in on, I think all of those things help. But, honestly, they’re not fundamental to me.”

**Domain 4: Intersections**

The fourth domain emerged from responses to how Whiteness shapes or intersects with participants’ other identities. Of the four categories in this domain, all were variants.

**Variant theme.** The first variant theme emerged around participants applying intersectional lens on their marginalized identities but not on Whiteness, as evidenced by the following participant:

I really struggled with the fact that my feelings of not being safe are valid. Yet, they become an easy excuse to avoid difficult conversations around race. I can have endless, endless difficult conversations around gender and sexuality and feel very defensive about that because I think I’m on the marginalized end of that spectrum.

Other participants described how Whiteness shapes their understanding of marginalization, in that “there’s a sense that others should acknowledge our marginalization and that we have an absolute entitlement to them as Whites.” This participant disclosed that, in racially diverse spaces, White individuals with marginalized identities (e.g., a queer White person) had tendencies to emphasize their marginalization at the expense of acknowledging or centering other forms of intersectional oppression (e.g., a queer BIPOC person).

One female participant emphasized the proactive support for racism and paternalism in White womanhood: “Being a White woman is a very specific thing. It’s tied to toxic masculinity. A lot of White women voted for Trump, for instance. I grew up with a certain type of White feminism that was not particularly intersectional.”
The second variant theme focused on *intergenerational oppression leading to White assimilation*. For instance, one participant described the mixed messages conferred by her multiracial family and their strong desire to assimilate into Whiteness and wealth in order to gain recognition and social privileges:

At airports, I would be treated differently than family members who looked more Arabic. I would be let through and they would not. This was a privilege that I had, and something was being cultivated in me because of how White-passing I am. You saw this cultural evaporation happening within my family. Language being lost, traditions being lost. The only thing we would hang onto were our annual reunions and foods that we cooked. But there's such a strong desire to assimilate, to be wealthy, to fit into the mainstream.

Similarly, a Jewish participant described his family’s rejection and abandonment of their ethnic culture at a time when anti-Semitism was at its peak: “They didn’t want anyone to know they were Jewish. They changed their names. I didn’t have any religious or community upbringing. As a family, we didn’t belong to anything.”

Another Jewish participant shared how they went from identifying with the oppressed to identifying as an oppressor in U.S. society:

I would not describe my experience as being Jewish in this country as having experienced discrimination or oppression; yet, my family comes from that. So I have a sense of what it feels like to not be seen, to have things assumed about you that are false, and to have people act on those things. But, when it came to communities of color, I was doing that to them as a White person - daily interactions all the way through.

The third variant theme emerged from participants who *centered a social class analysis among White communities*. One participant highlighted the role of social class in shaping an
intersectional understanding of Whiteness and their inherited power: “Because of Whiteness and class, I've been conditioned to assume that people are going to give me what I want and that I deserve things, right? Like I'm a student, I deserve this. But students of color don't assume that.”

Another participant highlighted the disconnect across White communities of different class compositions: “Being White and upper-middle class, I realized how little I understand about my class background and Whiteness shaping my personality. How little I understand about people who are White and working class.”

The fourth variant theme centered on White bodies monitored by White Supremacy Culture (WSC). The imposition of WSC standards ranged from traditional gender roles to beauty standards based on colorism or skin color. Phenotype and body type/size were considered intersectional identities as it impacted the way participants were treated in society and conferred more or less privilege (e.g., discrimination against overweight bodies). One participant explained how she was forced into plastic surgery by her parents to appear more phenotypically White:

I had an awareness of how White I am because my family commented on it all the time; how milky my skin is and how that was going to help me in my future. There is a lot of plastic surgery in my family. I was forced to have surgery at a young age to look as White as possible but that's not how they saw it.

Another participant noticed how colorism was enacted in the White cultural desire to not only be light-skinned but also light-eyed and light-haired. This participant grew up in a small town in central Wisconsin where everybody was “blonde and blue eyed. I have dark hair, dark eyes, olive skin and was constantly asked ‘what are you?’”

Another participant described oppressive and abusive gender dynamics that often occur:
White women are treated like broken White men. The way that you are valued is by supporting your men as they enact White Supremacy Culture. To keep going up against White men means that you will get hit with a lot of emotional and sometimes physical violence or abuse in pushing against the system.

**Domain 5: Utilizing Counter-spaces outside SURJ**

The fifth domain emerged from descriptions about the counter-spaces and strategies participants utilized outside of SURJ. Of the three categories in this domain, one was typical and two were variants.

**Typical theme.** Many participants described learning from BIPOC leaders, scholars, and activists. Some went through a process of unlearning White centered perspectives and learning new theories by BIPOC, as illustrated by this participant’s account:

I have had the White literary voice so deep in my head. I don’t need any more of it. It’s very unusual that I read a book by a White author now. By reading a lot of books by BIPOC, especially Afro-futurism, I’ve been able to knock some holes in that wall of my imagination.

Other participants highlighted the work of influential BIPOC authors in recent years:

I resonated with Ibram X. Kendi’s language around antiracism being a choice that we make every moment of our lives. I’ve had the opportunity to reflect on that and observe in my life that, yes, everything I do is not antiracist. I am absolutely complicit in capitalism, for example.

Another participant described somatic-based practices to process their racialized emotions:

The book *My Grandmother's Hands* by Resmaa Menakem is built around the somatic idea that we can only do so much outside of ourselves if we don't address the racism that
lives in our cells and bones from years and years of ancestors being part of White culture. It's been mentioned in every antiracism working group that I've participated in. The physical stuff has been such a block for me; that is exactly why I'm intentionally seeking out opportunities around somatics so that I can do all the other work better.

**Variant theme.** A variant theme emerged around *re-education about the history of race leading to critical consciousness*. This included practice-based, critical race theory academic courses that offered alternative ways to understand poverty and inequity as well as direct experiences that led to a better understanding of unjust systems and oppressive policies. As shared by one participant:

> I was in the juvenile justice system and put right in front of systemic racism. It became very obvious to me – the systemic nature of racism. That moved me into working in juvenile detention centers, in residential treatment facilities, and group homes. I worked with youth who were incarcerated or working through diversion programs. All of those experiences really radicalized my belief system.

Another participant explained their re-education process in an organization called White Awake:

> Through workshops and courses, it helps White people unpack their White identities and understand the history behind how White became a race, how White became what people are saying it is now. That helps me unpack a lot to think about my own history, my own ancestors, what they experienced, and how they became White.

The second variant theme revolved around *learning from parallel frameworks* intersecting with racial justice principles. This included drawing parallel lessons from other social justice issues and spiritual practices. For instance, one participant expressed the
understanding that “White Supremacy upholds not just racial superiority but gender norms and ideas of normalcy being the only acceptable way to live.”

Another participant highlighted similar goals between climate change activism and racial justice activism:

I was lucky to have a teacher who brought in disparate impacts about climate change and how it impacts those already marginalized. You can’t address climate change without also addressing racial justice, and you can’t address racial justice without addressing climate change.

One participant disclosed his history of addiction and described similarities between his experiences in Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and SURJ. He described that:

The 12 step spiritual principles are deeper foundations in my life than racial justice work. Am I living in accordance with my values? Am I causing harm? If I’m not living in accordance with my values and causing harm, what can I do to repair?

He went on to explain the parallel lessons he drew from AA:

Before I got clean, I didn’t believe that people could actually change. Now, I spend time every day with people who have fundamentally changed who they are. That’s been helpful for me in my racial justice work because I feel like a lot of it is the same thing.

**Domain 6: BIPOC Relations**

The sixth domain emerged from descriptions regarding participants’ relationships with BIPOC. Of the three categories in this domain, all were variants.

**Variant theme.** The first variant theme revolved around an *unwillingness to be honest with BIPOC in addressing power dynamics*. For instance, one participant described conflict between herself and her partner due to the racism expressed in her family against her partner.
They commented that: “If my partner had been White, I guess my family would have had an easier time connecting with her and potentially would have been more welcoming.” However, this participant did not address the racism, leading to the end of the relationship.

In identifying the challenge of building deeper and more enduring relations with BIPOC, one participant highlighted the main issue as: “People of color at work are conforming to White Supremacy expectations. You’re not really getting to know them. You’re seeing the face they’re putting on at church, you know?” Several participants also failed to address the power dynamics between Whites and BIPOC in predominantly White spaces and did not acknowledge this factor as being an obstacle in building more authentic relations.

The second variant theme centered on continued stereotyping of BIPOC, despite increased education. The majority of participants were highly educated, with 11 participants obtaining postgraduate degrees and a few participants with doctorate and professional degrees. Despite participants’ high educational levels, both past and current instances of racial stereotyping were found, such as reinforcing the idea of “inferior” BIPOC cultures. As reflected by one participant:

I made assumptions that Black people in particular are trying to be like White people. That their goal is assimilation into the good things that White people have - rather than thinking there are other worlds, goals, and ways of doing things.

Simultaneously, some participants exhibited and reported manifestations of stereotyping in the present day. During the interview, one participant reinforced the invisibility and marginalization of Asian American communities: “I guess when it comes to Asian people, I have probably not paid enough attention in general to how I think and feel about Asian people, Asian Americans.”
Another participant reflected on their tendency to objectify Latinx communities through endorsement of stereotypes: “While we were passing this bar, I said ‘Oh, I love Mexican boys.’ My friends were like, so that was a comment of racism and sexual objectivity. I was like, ‘What? No. I know Mexican people!’ It was that ignorant.”

The third variant theme highlighted the idea that there were limited BIPOC relations due to entrenchment in White spaces. This theme emerged from the observation that SURJ members were still surrounded by a majority of Whites in their personal lives, despite increased activism and antiracist development. One participant described how SURJ spaces provided opportunities to co-regulate emotions and build support, which decreased their need to engage in new relationships.

In contrast, other participants disclosed the anxiety they felt in diverse activist spaces as they became more aware of their White identities and the social ease to which they could remain in White spaces. As described by one participant:

I’ve been aware of it for years and just grappling with: how do I break away from this current? It makes a lot of sense that I married a White person and that most of my places of employment have been predominantly White. Just the blatant segregation that allows and encourages White folks to continue being White, without knowing that they're continuing the segregation.

Domain 7: Performative Activism

The seventh domain emerged from participants’ accounts about their efforts in activism and allyship. Of the three categories in this domain, one was general and two were variants.

General theme. Harmful social impact as a White person emerged as the sole general theme in the present study, applying to all cases except one. While there is broad overlap across
participants’ experiences, few generalizations about them can be made. Referencing both the past and present day, one participant described how: “Us White folks have a lot of work to do on ourselves and with ourselves because we are so distorted given our socialization in this society.”

A second participant described the social impact on others and themselves:

My Whiteness has meant my ignorance and lack of capacity to hear things and take things in from people of color. It has done serious damage to sweep relationships along the way, whether that damage was ever discussed or not. It is a source of a lot of pain for me.

Other participants highlighted the impact when White activists entered communities of color and took valuable resources and knowledge from BIPOC, without giving back. One participant disclosed:

I was hesitant to do organizing early on because I didn't see a model where I wasn't from outside the community. A lot of organizing that my peers were doing, especially middle-class White folks, was entering into communities of color and then taking and leaving.

Another participant described how they were able to learn about race through the pain and trauma of BIPOC, “witnessing harm being done and through relationships where I built trust; people of color are willing to tell me, push me, help me understand.”

**Variant theme.** There was a variant theme around *engaging in subtle forms of White solidarity*. Participants identified how they upheld the racial status quo in a range of ways. One participant recounted:

I have stood up in very visible and active ways in defense of sexuality. I have conflicting emotions around the fact that I'm not defending antiracism in any similar way compared to how I defend my personal experiences of gender and sexuality.
A number of participants disclosed their complicity in perpetuating racism through silence, avoidance of conflict, and avoidance of racial conversations with other Whites. One participant disclosed: “There have been times when [White] people said something - it wasn't even in front of a person of color - but they said something racist and I didn't speak up.”

A second participant discussed how they previously didn’t engage in or contribute to multiracial organizations because they were focused on their personal self-image. Specifically, they were fearful of making a mistake in front of others and being called a racist; “that would be a terrible thing to be called a racist. I didn't function very well because I was simply too afraid.”

Another participant described an instance in which she heard a White man say that he was glad to be “White, male, and Christian” because they “control the world” and “like it that way.” This participant shared that she continues to be silent in similar situations today: “I don't try to initiate conversations because I don't have hope of enabling them to change. Maybe I’ll just say that certain comments make me uncomfortable.”

Second, the existence of social justice rhetoric, yet little action emerged as a variant theme. One participant reflected on the pervasive lack of integrity and how “a lot of White people got activated to get more involved or learn things about racial justice in Summer of 2020. But, a year later, only 8 or 9% of White people were still doing something about it.”

Another participant expressed how “it’s very voluntary for White people to always opt out; that's something I struggle with,” while another participant discussed how “you can stop being an ally anytime you want because you're doing things for others. You don't see it as connected to yourself, other than it makes you feel good.”

**Domain 8: Beyond Neoliberal Constructs of White Allyship**
The eighth and final domain emerged from participants’ accounts about the significance of antiracism to their lives and practices that were critical to their racial justice work. Of the five categories in this domain, one was typical and four were variants.

**Typical theme.** There was a typical theme around *recognizing how White Supremacy Culture (WSC) manifests in daily life.* Some participants expressed how a lack of external rewards in society for challenging WSC remained a major obstacle to their antiracist work. One participant expressed compassion around why it is difficult to get White people out of their racist mentalities and sense of superiority: “If White Supremacy is really based around comfort, convenience, and control, then it’s hard to give that up.”

One participant drew parallels between WSC and the toxic cycle of addiction: “One of the handouts they would give was the characteristics of WSC. They practically overlapped one-on-one with character defects of a person who is an addict.”

Another participant noted how WSC shows up in her professional life and ambitions; her life choices negating some of her personal and moral values:

I want more diversity but I’ll be honest. When it's me on the other side and I'm the candidate, I want to get picked. I feel guilty and shitty because I have so many opportunities. I have so much privilege. Still, at the end of the day, I feel really sad.

Another participant discussed how WSC shows up in their intimate relationships and creating harm towards their significant others:

The love of my life was a person of color. My Whiteness complicates love because interracial relationships are hard. I think about race every day. I have to think about it even more and, honestly, in more painful ways when I’m dating someone who is a person of color.
**Variant theme.** All four variant themes explored antiracist practices that were important to participants. The first variant theme highlighted a *bidirectional cycle between self-reflection and action*. One participant discussed “moving beyond reading and education” and “White-centered forms of complacency” by asking themselves critical questions such as: “What are you going to risk to really combat and confront racism? What does that look like? What are your intentions and actions? What are your behaviors? How are those things in alignment with antiracism?”

A few participants noted the iterative process of doing the “education piece” and “action piece” for themselves. As exemplified by one participant: “If [internal inspection] doesn't translate into action, then I'm missing a piece of the work. Honestly, I went from action to more introspection and education and then back to action - a more educated action.” Participants also emphasized the importance of engaging intentionally in this bidirectional cycle because “when you do have White privilege, it’s easy to get sucked back into busy, everyday stuff.”

The second variant theme focused on *aligning life values with antiracist goals*. Several participants noted that this meant shifting resources, including financial resources and using their connections and authority in the community “to support or amplify the lead of people of color who are working to get their rights, and organizing other White people to do the same.”

Similarly, another participant discussed shifting their weight to support the vision of BIPOC leaders and communities already doing antiracist work:

My orientation for a long time was about how do we make it better? How do White folks make it better? Now, my orientation is more along the lines of - who are the BIPOC groups, leaders, writers, thinkers, scholars, and activists whose work is out there in the
world? That’s something quite different and feels like I should place more weight behind as a White person.

The third variant theme focused on understanding personal stakes in the racial justice movement. Participants described coming to terms with their roles as White people in racial justice work and conceptualizing what their personal or mutual interests could be in a collective vision of antiracism. One participant summarized this process as follows:

In SURJ, we use the language of mutual or shared interest. How do I understand the way in which racism is really harmful and toxic, in my White community and the White folks in my family? Then, what do I have to gain? What does my community have to gain by joining across color lines to fight for the things that we all need and deserve? That's the last big piece - being clear and discovering and naming my stake, my personal and shared interest in this fight.

Another participant described how their roles changed from wanting to be a “helper” to understanding the dynamics of a “wicked oppressive system” in which “we are all losers - some of us much more than others. We all have different roles to play, given our situation in the struggle and depending on our advantages or lack of advantages.”

Finally, the fourth variant theme centered around engaging in conversations with Whites about their Whiteness. One participant outlined her intentions to converse:

The most I’ve done is explain things to people or bring people in so that a black or brown person doesn’t need to do that. It spares them of that emotional labor. I even met with a White cop on Zoom. Honestly, it was a terrible conversation and I hated it. But I was like, at least you’re not fucking doing this on a Black person because this would be torture for them.
Another participant described how conversations about Whiteness changed his relationships with both BIPOC and Whites:

SURJ has this practice of Calling In. I’ve done several of their workshops, where you practice talking to White people about issues of racial justice and try to find out what their feelings are and, ideally, get them more involved against racism. That has caused friction between me and my wife’s family. On the other hand, it’s brought me closer to some family members who feel the same way as I do. So I have all these relationships with people in SURJ and with people of color which wouldn’t have worked otherwise. It’s broadened my life in a way that involvement in any group would do.

**Prototypical Case Summary**

A prototypical portrait of participants can be created by synthesizing results of all general and typical themes across domains (Hill et al., 1997). The purpose of a prototypical case is to create a standard and cohesive narrative around the majority of participants. In this study, the prototype is a cisgender, heterosexual or queer (she/they), White American female participant of Western European descent. She is highly educated, identifies as middle/upper-middle class, and resides in an urban area in America. They have been an active member of a national organization called Showing Up For Racial Justice (SURJ) for at least three years. She grows up in a predominantly White neighborhood and attends White schools, where interactions with BIPOC are extremely limited. She thinks that she lives in a post-racial era of colorblindness, where racism and racial inequity no longer exist. Living with contradictory messages leads to distorted views about the world and deep dissonance about the dynamics of race, racism, and power. She gradually becomes conscious of her own race in college, where she meets more BIPOC and learns about their starkly different life experiences.
As an adult, they notice microaggressions happening but feel paralyzed to act in these moments. They also begin to notice their own racist beliefs and actions. Upon realizing their default role and racist socialization as a White person, they experience a cocktail of shame. Unable to tolerate such intense emotions, they develop strong defense mechanisms to regain racial comfort and a sense of control. They join SURJ after hearing about racially-motivated hate crimes and the murders of unarmed Black citizens on the news and feeling a strong desire to contribute to the racial justice movement. Their motivations increase when they realize there are no serious conversations about race or Whiteness happening in their own communities.

Initially skeptical of a predominantly White organization working for antiracism, they begin to form supportive relationships and gain a sense of community belonging in SURJ. She becomes active in projects, activities, and workshops where she learns how to deconstruct the meaning of Whiteness and how to become accountable. She untangles her upbringing and the White culture she was entrenched in. She learns how systemic racism operates and how even White communities were divided against each other to maintain White Supremacy. She reflects on her intersectional identities and how they have shaped her personality. She learns that her family experienced an intergenerational history of assimilation into White culture and abandoned their heritage to assimilate into the White race. She draws parallel lessons from other social issues and recognizes the different ways that White Supremacy Culture manifests in her personal and professional life.

With greater critical consciousness, they attempt to be a White ally but find themselves causing harm towards BIPOC. When this occurs, she now understands how to be accountable by processing her reactions with fellow SURJ members. She has learned that unprocessed emotions will become blocks to her antiracist work and relations to BIPOC. She continues to make
mistakes in her antiracist journey and struggles to address the different power dynamics with BIPOC in daily life. However, her racial stamina has become stronger, and she chooses not to give up due to the accountability created with herself and towards her SURJ community.

She discovers that being part of the racial justice movement is an iterative process. She must intentionally and consistently engage in new antiracist practices. They begin to align their life values with antiracist goals by, for example, shifting resources into communities of color. She also learns new theories and frameworks from BIPOC scholars and activists. Through re-education about the history of race and new antiracist practices, she gains a clearer insight into what her personal stake and shared interest in racial justice is. She no longer sees herself as a White ally but integrates antiracism into her personal identity and values. As she engages in more conversations about Whiteness, her relationships begin to change; they wish for more authentic relations with BIPOC but find limited opportunities to form such relationships. At times, she finds antiracist work to be burdensome due to the backlash from other White people and institutions. In these moments, she appreciates SURJ as a supportive counter-space to White Supremacy Culture. They think about the limitations of working in White-centered organizing and hope to collaborate in more multiracial spaces, whether through SURJ or other groups. They wonder if there will ever be a time when an organization like SURJ no longer needs to exist.
Chapter 5: Discussion

Racial justice is a core principle guiding research, education, and practice in the field of psychology. As helping professionals, psychologists and mental health practitioners seem well-positioned to advance antiracist initiatives in society. However, the history of psychology is complex and replete with the perpetuation of racism and human hierarchy in the United States. Some scholars argue that psychologists have played superfluous roles in the racial justice movement and that psychology as a field has more often worked against antiracism (Ratele & Malherbe, 2020). White Supremacy Culture (WSC), outdated professional socialization practices, and hostile training environments have led to racial trauma, high attrition rates, and compounding mental health issues for BIPOC trainees, clients, and communities (Sherman, 2021). Moreover, epistemic restrictions and the lack of precise guidelines on implementing antiracism into training programs remain barriers to advancing racial equity within the field.

Scholars argue that combatting racism, along with the risks of participating in antiracist struggles, has always been led by grassroots activists and not psychologists (Ratele & Malherbe, 2020). To that end, this study aimed to discover antiracist frameworks that psychology training programs could construct and adapt from the experiences, motivations, and practices of White activists in Showing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ), a national organization that aims to “educate, organize, and mobilize Whites to show up powerfully for racial justice and collective liberation” (SURJ, 2022a).

Specifically, this study aimed to answer the following questions: 1) What motivates SURJ activists to join the racial justice movement, and what keeps them committed over the long term? 2) How do SURJ activists conceptualize their relationship to WSC and the impact of Whiteness on their intersectional identities? 3) What are the biggest challenges to antiracist work
for SURJ activists? 4) What counter-spaces (if any) do activists utilize inside and outside of SURJ? 5) How do SURJ activists understand their roles in the racial justice movement?

This chapter addresses the ways in which this study’s findings correspond to the research questions and expand upon previous literature. This chapter will first be organized according to the five research questions. Implications for psychology training programs will then be discussed. Last, study limitations and recommendations for future research will be reviewed.

**Research Question 1: What motivates SURJ activists to join the racial justice movement, and what keeps them committed over the long term?**

Reconciling cognitive dissonance. Domain 2 highlights the main reasons that SURJ activists in this study joined the racial justice movement. Throughout their lives, *growing up in the racist backstage and performing in the colorblind frontstage* created an uneasy phenomenon of cognitive dissonance among participants. This dissonance was rooted from living in a colorblind society that denied the existence of racism and racial inequities. However, they continued to witness racism being actively circulated within their own predominantly White communities. Participants recalled how they watched historical films about “Black people getting sprayed with hoses in the streets” and subconsciously experienced a gut feeling of tension. Yet, they lacked the concepts and words to describe how White communities were directly perpetuating racial harm towards BIPOC in any way. One participant discussed how he had *politically active parents who never referenced race*, and how concepts of social justice also maintained this veneer of colorblindness.

The majority of SURJ activists described being “awakened” to the real world through shocking political events, such as the murder of George Floyd in 2020 and the 2016 election win of right-wing presidential candidate Donald Trump. These events acted as moral “shocks” to
their systems and colorblind worldviews. To make sense of these events, new connections had to be made between historic and current events (e.g., connections between U.S. slavery and modern-day mass incarceration). SURJ activists utilized temporal counter-spaces to reconcile these experiences of cognitive dissonance. Specifically, political issues were linked to sociopolitical frameworks and ongoing historical oppression (Mills, 2000). As one participant shared:

I watched some different videos that laid out very clearly all of the links from the historical events or laws that were specifically racist to the present day. So, the history of Jim Crow and segregation and what was happening during Reconstruction and how that failed and how redlining and G.I. Bill and all these different histories then relate directly to now. I think those things sort of moved me more towards action.

Unlike previous studies (e.g., Smith et al. 2008), which found that White people tend to “spin away” or rationalize racism and its relevance to their lives, SURJ activists confronted the meaning of Whiteness through the use of counter-spaces and their re-education of American history. This difference in response may be due to the activist (versus non-activist) population under study. Indeed, research has shown that activists tend to use strategic counter-responses to social conflict, while non-activists may be more prone to reaffirming the status quo and adopting false consciousness (i.e., the viewpoint of those in power) to reconcile feelings of discomfort or cognitive dissonance (Neville et al., 2005).

Ironically, the desire to commit to racial justice led some SURJ activists to engage in beliefs about White exceptionalism. There was a tendency for new activists to distance themselves from other Whites through their activism and to believe they were conducting sufficient or far more antiracist work than most Whites. At times, these beliefs led to complacent
and paternalistic behaviors that were counterproductive to antiracism. Yet, joining the racial justice movement was one effective way for SURJ activists to create boundaries around White Supremacy Culture and to continue developing their identities as racial justice activists. Thus, the initial impulse of most participants to separate themselves from mainstream White communities and culture was formative in their change process.

**Group belonging.** Domain 3, *finding community in SURJ*, highlights the primary reasons that SURJ activists remain committed to the movement over the long term. Through SURJ, participants found a *structured space to gain community belonging*. Participants gained validation, emotional support, and a group identity through their connections with fellow activists. SURJ provided psychological grounding and a new community, which cultivated a desire among participants to become more involved in antiracist work. Participants also learned how to *deconstruct Whiteness and become accountable* as a White person in society. By working together as a group rather than individually, SURJ activists were able to maintain a greater sense of accountability and commitment to antiracism. Several participants described how it is “easier to continue because you meet more people and get more involved. It becomes part of who you are as a person.” These findings corroborate previous research on the power and benefits of cohesive group dynamics in shaping individual action (Stephan et al., 2016). Group membership has been shown to play a critical role in the development of social attitudes and behaviors (Kite et al., 2022). Perceptions of social norms around the appropriate treatment of outgroups are more powerful predictors of intergroup behaviors than individual attitudes (Paluck, 2012). In these ways, group cohesiveness helped to create interpersonal counter-spaces to form solidarity and communality in SURJ.
Moreover, most participants were recruited through political events organized by SURJ, such as the 2017 murder of Jamar Clark in Twin Cities and the 2020 George Floyd protests. During these demonstrations, participants reported that initial conversations with organizers were immediately followed up with, and they were connected to their SURJ statewide chapters. Strategically, SURJ organizers used physical counter-spaces to place themselves in public and private settings. This allowed SURJ to recruit individuals from various backgrounds and to connect to Whites through shared emotional reactions (e.g., moral outrage) to political events.

In SURJ, accountability work included showing up to meetings, events, and workshops where projects were focused on deconstructing the meaning of Whiteness and White Supremacy. An example was a historical ancestry project aimed at understanding how one’s White ancestors assimilated into the White race and what accountability meant at the personal, group, and societal levels. One participant shared that Whiteness and “what we need to do with that” became her primary form of connection with other Whites. In contrast to their lives before SURJ, most participants disclosed that they changed as an individual and felt that they were making a positive difference in the world.

**Intersecting motivations.** Domain 5 highlights how intersecting motivations and learning from parallel frameworks (e.g., queer rights, climate justice, anti-war) led SURJ activists to join and commit to antiracism. One participant described how climate change and racial justice were interconnected issues due to global warming’s impact on poor communities and developing countries. Other participants expressed living out social justice values such as “equality,” “do no harm,” and “integrity” among different social movements. These findings align with previous research illustrating how White activists often have primary and secondary motivations connected to their intersectional identities (e.g., Fisher et al., 2018).
Identifying shared values also allowed activists to better understand their interest convergence (or personal stakes) within the racial justice movement. For some participants, antiracism was not only about achieving racial justice but also about addressing other forms of inequality in society. SURJ activists were able to make use of temporal counter-spaces via shared intersectional frameworks around different social issues. Social issues were primarily understood by participants from a macro-perspective and in relation to broader sociopolitical contexts. To that end, organizations like SURJ may want to consider increasing partnerships with other social movements and organizations in order to facilitate White communities’ commitment and mutual interest in the racial justice movement.

Research Question 2: How do SURJ activists conceptualize their relationship to White Supremacy Culture and the impact of Whiteness on their intersectional identities?

A toxic cycle and entrenched system. Multiple domains highlight how SURJ activists conceptualized their relationship to White Supremacy Culture (WSC). Under Domain 1, participants described experiencing a cocktail of shame because they were, unknowingly, “foot soldiers” for White Supremacy throughout their lives. Shame has been described as an emotion in which “the entire self feels exposed, inferior and degraded” (Eisenberg, 2000, p. 667). Participants expressed how WSC became an integrated part of their personalities and character structures and how they previously used strong defense mechanisms to regain racial comfort. One participant disclosed how their anxiety and difficulty in handling conflict were formed through WSC expectations to always be “nice” and “polite” in social settings. In Domain 8, SURJ activists described recognizing how White Supremacy Culture manifests in daily life. WSC was described by one participant as a cycle of addiction. Addiction to White power and privilege
was akin to the “character defects of a person who is an addict,” leading to harmful effects for both the individual addicted and for those around them.

SURJ activists further described feeling stuck in a toxic relationship and not being able to fully separate from WSC. For example, Domain 4 highlights how White bodies are monitored by WSC through the imposition of narrow standards of beauty. Participants experienced this imposition on their minds, physical bodies, and relationships. Obsession with White skin tone and colorism emerged as a consistent theme. One participant from a multiracial family described how her parents worked hard to assimilate her into the White race by having her undergo plastic surgery. Intergenerational oppression leading to White assimilation highlights this strong pressure to assimilate into Whiteness and to erase non-White cultures and ethnic identities. Webb (2019) describes “social pressure among Whites to meet certain standards of racial appearances, such as blonde hair and blue eyes” (p. 22). Even among participants who were read as racially ambiguous throughout their lives (e.g., due to their dark skin tone), they felt a strong need to reiterate their Whiteness. Such experiences align with research illustrating the detrimental effects of colorism and narrow beauty standards on all communities (Hannon, 2015).

**Whiteness and intersectional identities.** Domain 4 highlights the ways that White identity intersects with activists’ other identities. The majority of participants did not consider the impact of White intersectionality until they joined SURJ. When they did, participants evidenced a tendency to selectively apply an intersectional lens on their marginalized identities but not on their Whiteness. Some participants described using the intersectionality of gender and sexuality to understand LGBTQ+ discrimination but did not connect their White privilege to experiences of both marginalization and privilege until joining SURJ. Most participants never reflected on the different marginalization between a BIPOC and a White queer individual,
oftentimes imposing their own White worldviews onto BIPOC counterparts. Similar patterns emerged among the lived experiences of being a cisgender BIPOC woman versus a cisgender White woman. These findings align with research revealing that simply having an oppressed identity does not automatically lead to racial empathy and understanding of racial oppression (e.g., Han, 2007; Jardina, 2019; Táiwò, 2022). In fact, racism remains prominent within predominantly White spaces even when marginalized groups are included (e.g., LGBTQ+ communities). One participant noted that “there’s a sense that…we have an absolute entitlement to [our marginalization] as Whites” in contrast to BIPOC. In these communities, intersectional systems of oppression exerted their influence through underlying attitudes of racial superiority and White Supremacy Culture.

Philosopher Olúfẹmi O. Táiwò (2022) also describes how a politics of deference towards marginalized identities can end up reinforcing the status quo through what he terms “elite capture.” Elite capture is when the advantaged few in a group steer the political direction and resources of organizations, movements, and social structures towards their own narrow interests (Táiwò, 2022). One example is the corporatization of the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) industry after the 2020 racial justice protests. By weaponizing attention away from the root, material causes of systemic inequality and glamorizing certain marginalized figures and their traumas, Táiwò argues that elite groups can effectively maintain the status quo while performing a disingenuous identity-obsessed politics lacking in true policy changes for communities. We see the consequences of identity-obsessed politics in today’s social media world, where advocacy groups are narrowly defined based on similar identities rather than coalition-building and shared political goals. Importantly, Táiwò underscores our naïve tendency to presume that anyone with a marginalized identity will be aligned with their broader group’s interests. In reality, individuals
may act against their long-term, collective interests for various reasons (e.g., fear, internalized oppression, careerism, self-interest) and become capitalism’s latest currency instead of helping to build grassroots coalitions across different communities.

There were rare moments when SURJ activists seemed to understand their impact as a White person through one of their marginalized identities. As a participant noted:

It wasn't until I came out as queer in college; then, started meeting and actually knowing people of different racial groups that my stuff started getting challenged. Then, it was challenged pretty regularly and sometimes pretty intensely. I started to see pretty quickly…how many lies were woven into my upbringing.

Spatial justice framed this participant’s learning experience. Their intersectional identity was a space of resistance, helping to destabilize the White Racial Frame (Feagin, 2020). Specifically, the intersectionality of sexuality and Whiteness created a physical counter-space for this participant to interact with more racial groups. The LGBTQ+ spaces were more racially diverse than the non-LGBTQ+ White spaces they typically inhabited. Intersectionality also offered a temporal counter-space where connections were drawn between White intergenerational privilege and history. A few participants realized how their marginalization was protected from systemic violence due to their race and understood that Whiteness allowed them to center their marginalization in a way that BIPOC could not safely do in a White Supremacy Culture.

Regardless of its impact, these findings illustrate that intersectionality as a framework has the potential to build solidarity between different social movements. SURJ activists described using parallel frameworks from other movements to better understand racial issues. Similar to the imposition of White middle-class ways of living on other groups, participants noted how the gender binary and patriarchy created myopic standards around what an ideal family should look
like (e.g., nuclear family) (Isenberg, 2016). Such findings align with previous research on
intersectional motivations and interest convergence theory, which posit that racial equity must be
understood to benefit White communities in some way (Roberts & Jesudason, 2013). Thus,
intersectionality frameworks may shed light on how White people may be more directly
impacted by the negative consequences of White Supremacy. Indeed, one negative effect
underscored by some participants was the disconnect between White communities across social
class, especially poor/working class versus middle/upper class Whites. Participants highlighted
centering a social class analysis among White communities in their antiracist work. SURJ
activists had learned how class divisions were historically created to divide marginalized groups
with shared economic interests. Reuniting populations with shared interests and cultivating
collective power among such groups remain central objectives of SURJ.

Research Question 3: What are the biggest challenges to antiracist work for SURJ
activists?

Breaking false consciousness. Almost all SURJ activists described growing up with a
sense of psychological false consciousness throughout their lives. False consciousness refers to
the ways that people work against themselves and their collective interests by adopting the
viewpoint of those in power (Neville et al., 2005); in this case, adopting the values of White
Supremacy Culture (WSC). WSC was ubiquitous in every part of participants’ lives - from their
neighborhoods, schools, social, and professional circles. Activists described a process of
awakening to the realization that the habits and tastes they acquired, books they read, movies
they watched, historical figures they learned about, and all of their relationships were steeped in
and defined by WSC. As explained by one participant:
I spent the majority of my life reading books by White authors, unknowingly. I wasn't seeking that out. There was no one in my life who was like ‘Whiteness is the best, you should only read White authors’…If I went back through my childhood, they were writing about White characters. They were centering Whiteness and White experiences…There's a lot of violence as a result of White Supremacy. One of the scariest things is how prevalent it is without folks noticing.

Domain 5 describes how SURJ activists “broke” false consciousness by utilizing physical, temporal, and intrapersonal counter-spaces outside SURJ, including learning from BIPOC leaders, scholars, and activists. A participant described “knocking some holes in that wall of my [White] imagination” by learning from BIPOC frameworks like Afro-futurism (Jenkins, 2021). Participants also processed emotional blocks to their antiracist development by engaging in creative somatic exercises and self-reflecting on their ancestry histories. The use of these BIPOC frameworks align with Feagin (2020)’s theory on antiracist resistance framing, where historical counter-frames have the power to undermine the White Racial Frame (e.g., W.E.B. DuBois’ concept of double consciousness). For SURJ activists, these counter-frameworks provided opportunities for personal self-reflection and healing from lifelong socialization into Whiteness.

Termed the “antidote” to oppression (Freire, 1984), SURJ activists also cultivated critical consciousness through re-educating themselves about the history of race. This re-education process included classes and workshops offering critical theory as a framework to understand race and power. A few participants discussed becoming “radicalized” after being proximate to unjust systems and learning how racial oppression works (e.g., criminal justice system). These findings align with research on the importance of critical consciousness in activism, and how
activists must first engage in a process of self-reflection and action around their oppressive social structures (Freire, 1984). Domain 8 highlights this bidirectional cycle between self-reflection and action and how activists constantly need to be doing the “education piece” and “action piece” for themselves and asking critical questions about what they are willing to risk for racial justice. Importantly, rejecting the notion that they are expert “Master Knowers” as White people and adopting racial humility were vital to developing greater critical consciousness.

**Lack of emotional regulatory tools.** Domain 1 describes the major challenges of processing a cocktail of shame and challenging emotions for participants. For most SURJ activists, there was an initial experience of shock and paralysis in understanding the structures of White Supremacy. This initial reaction aligns with research on White identity theory (Helms, 1990), White fragility (DiAngelo, 2018), and White Racial Frame (Feagin, 2020) - which all posit that Whites must undergo a revolutionary process of “waking up” from the dominant White worldview and working through their dysregulated emotional responses.

Corroborating Ford et al. (2022)’s White fragility regulatory response framework, SURJ activists experienced significant challenges in managing their strong defense mechanisms to regain racial comfort. Many participants went through a cyclical process of being triggered by their understanding of White identity, shaming and blaming themselves, experiencing intense emotions, and reacting with defensiveness and fear. One participant highlighted how her eating disorder was associated with White fragility and her need for “comfort, convenience, and control” about the world. A participant described using somatic therapy exercises (i.e., mind-body practices) and self-reflexive exercises (e.g., journaling) to process challenging emotions, which allowed them to understand the functionality of their emotions and to move past fragility.
Such findings highlight the necessity of using psychological tools to advance White antiracist development. It remained insufficient that SURJ activists merely moved through the stages of racial identity development. Their fragility reactions mirrored trauma symptoms, in which emotional capacity goes beyond one’s window of tolerance and creates a cycle of disturbance (Fisher, 2017). There was something dehumanizing in the way that some participants viewed themselves and the way that race and identity created barriers to human connection. One participant discussed how their guilt made them distance themselves from others and lose out on relationships. The language of condemnation in activism may foster this crippling guilt that disconnects people. A psychological tool like somatic-based therapy (Levine & Rao, 2020) or Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (DBT) may help White activists hold a dialectical understanding of their antiracist process. Researchers have created antiracist adaptations to DBT for White therapists, which could be utilized by activists and psychologists alike (Pierson et al., 2022). In particular, DBT’s concept of radical acceptance could facilitate the processing of cognitive dissonance and redirect feelings of shame, blame, and guilt into more productive forms of action (e.g., working to dismantle systems that created racial hierarchies in the first place). While initial White fragility reactions were maladaptive, working through such responses facilitated participants’ antiracist development and led them to seek activist spaces and intrapersonal counter-spaces for processing and healing. These spaces also provided opportunities to explore the role of human connection and an individual’s personhood in antiracism.

**White solidarity and lack of external rewards.** Domain 7 underscores how engaging in subtle forms of White solidarity remained a potential barrier for SURJ activists. Specifically, participants disclosed that their fears of conflict enabled racist attitudes and behaviors to perpetuate in predominantly White spaces; for instance, silence after a racist remark was made
by another White person was common. Although participants faced little risk in such social situations, they admitted to being fearful of speaking up and potentially experiencing backlash (e.g., social ostracization) at that time. A few participants noted their willingness to take a clear stance on other social issues (e.g., LGBTQ+ rights); yet were overtaken by paralyzing fear when it came to difficult conversations around race. These patterns of White solidarity align with theories on the power of backstage culture, where Whites are conditioned to “perform” a ritual of racism in front of other Whites to gain social approval and acceptance (Feagin, 2020). However, unlike the general White population, SURJ activists became highly conscious of nuanced forms of White solidarity and their complicity in backstage culture when it did occur.

In addition, Domain 8 highlights the lack of external rewards for antiracist work in current society and penalties of breaking with White solidarity. SURJ activists described being ostracized from groups if they did challenge other White people on racial topics. One participant described a tense conversation where they were penalized for speaking up:

There was something where a [White] woman was talking about liking to knit White caps for homeless babies because the White looks so cute against their skin. I was like ‘so…homeless babies all have the same skin color?’...I started to say stuff like ‘how do you know ahead of time what color their skin is?’ Immediately, others in the group made a joke out of it and quickly deflected, so that the conversation could not happen.

This participant was never invited back to the group after this conversation. SURJ activists described similar social penalties following challenges to the status quo. Engaging in conversation with other Whites about their Whiteness emerged as a regular antiracist practice for SURJ activists. Participants noted the difficulties in bringing non-activist White people into
deeper racial conversations and using SURJ spaces (e.g., Calling In workshops) to build their racial stamina around potential backlash and retaliation from other Whites.

Although such penalties were discouraging, the significance of external rewards decreased as participants became more involved in SURJ. Participants described a sense of inoculation from the rewards of WSC through their activist relationships and how this fostered greater resiliency. One participant described how having direct conversations about Whiteness changed his relationships for the better and allowed his connections with BIPOC to become more authentic. Overall, the SURJ community became a protective factor against the toxic rewards of WSC. Instead, antiracist activism, antiracist ideologies, antiracist emotions, and antiracist relationships buffered the desire for external rewards in a WSC. Physical and interpersonal counter-spaces provided the contexts where collective solidarity could be protected and cultivated. Indeed, participants reiterated the importance of recommitting themselves through SURJ spaces. Despite barriers to antiracism, these insights point to the powerful use of spatial justice in building novel spaces of resistance, inoculation, healing, and justice.

Research Question 4: What counter-spaces (if any) do activists utilize inside and outside of SURJ?

Inside SURJ. Domain 3, finding community in SURJ, reiterates the concept of spatial justice as “spaces of resistance” (Brown & Pickerill, 2009) that exist in opposition to oppressive systems and dominant cultures. White Supremacy Culture (WSC) was the ongoing current that SURJ activists had to move against in order to advance racial equity.

First, SURJ as an organization was a physical space that provided safety and containment for activists to develop their antiracism and identities in a productive manner. Whether virtual or in person, the organization provided individual and group opportunities via meetings, protests,
gatherings, town halls, and other community spaces. One participant described that entering SURJ felt like “leaving a cult” of Whiteness and White Supremacy within broader society. In addition to physical offices and statewide chapters, SURJ maintained a strong online presence through its website and social media accounts.

Second, SURJ meetings, workshops, and trainings were temporal spaces where mental connections were made between U.S. history and present-day events and inequities. A common project that participants conducted was a historical ancestry project, which reconnected participants with the historical facts of how Whiteness was created, how their White ancestors chose or did not choose to be part of the White race, and what sacrifices were made to their communities as a result. Not only was this temporal space mental and emotional, but it also manifested physiologically. Participants described how the mind-body work of somatic therapy helped them to process their intergenerational trauma into White assimilation. In particular, they referenced Resmaa Menakem’s *My Grandmother’s Hands*, which puts forth the theory that the racism living inside of and perpetuated within White bodies needs to be processed and healed. Participants described how they experienced physical barriers and emotional blocks in the form of White fragility responses. Additionally, somatic-based practices helped activists move past their fragility reactions and strengthen their racial stamina when faced with interracial encounters and in their interactions with other Whites.

Third, SURJ provided the intrapersonal space and opportunity to engage in self-reflection and healing through critical emotional reflexivity. SURJ was a refuge from the backlash and opposition that activists frequently experienced in society. The organization also aided its members in aligning their internal values (e.g., equity, morals) with their external goals (e.g., working towards a fairer society). Participants were able to reflect on their intersectional
identities, deconstruct the meaning of Whiteness, and learn how to become accountable as a White person. SURJ also provided a therapeutic space within a larger community framework and inspired optimism and hope. One member, who identified as a former addict, compared SURJ’s process to his recovery from substance abuse in the past. This participant described how he asked himself similar self-reflective questions about his personal values and behaviors and consciously took steps toward building a new life with greater integrity.

Finally, SURJ gave activists the *interpersonal space* to create collective solidarity through relationships, friendships, and a sense of belonging through community. Several participants reported that they finally felt understood once they joined SURJ as a member. They felt seen and understood in their dissonance, White fragility responses, antiracist development, as well as feelings of isolation and hopelessness as an activist. Overall, SURJ activists shared a deep sense of duty in their collective goal to work towards a more equitable world.

**Outside SURJ.** Activists found additional counter-spaces to facilitate their antiracist work and development. Domain 5, utilizing counter-spaces outside SURJ, describes physical spaces that offer novel ways to learn about race, racism, and White Supremacy. This included classrooms, workshops, and community centers facilitating honest conversations about White privilege, power, and racial oppression in society.

Counter-spaces outside of SURJ included temporal spaces of learning from BIPOC leaders, scholars, and activists as well as psychological spaces to decenter the White Eurocentric perspective. In particular, the rise and visibility of BIPOC scholars and authors since 2020 had a significant impact on activists’ antiracist development. Since the racial justice protests of 2020, the work of Ibram X. Kendi and Resmaa Menakem were frequently highlighted as breakthrough
scholarships on the history of race and racial trauma. These BIPOC scholars fed the public’s need to understand race and White Supremacy in its current form.

Counter-spaces providing re-education about the history of race provided *temporal and intrapersonal spaces* to critically reflect on unjust systems and oppressive policies. Intellectual knowledge through courses and workshops as well as first-hand experiences facilitated participants’ understanding of the depths of systemic racism and racial inequity in the United States. These spaces provided the tools to unpack previously unquestioned White frameworks, ideologies, and emotions as well as the White Racial Frame (Feagin, 2020). Additionally, parallel frameworks based on other social justice issues provided a powerful counter-space to break against the dominant lens of White Eurocentrism.

*Interpersonal spaces* were discovered through common intersectional motivations across SURJ activists. Social justice issues such as LGBTQ rights, women’s rights, and immigrant rights allowed activists to feel communality and solidarity with the racial justice movement. These findings align with research on intersectional motivations, which theorizes that focusing on overlapping identities can cultivate solidarity across different identities (Roberts & Jesudason, 2013). Moreover, such findings corroborate interest convergence theory, illustrating that racial justice activism can intersect with other social issues in ways that benefit White communities (e.g., LGBTQ rights) and affirm the goals of other movements. Organizations like SURJ were likely effective because they underscored these intersectional movements, especially the economic concerns of poor and working-class Whites, in their strategic organizing efforts.

**Research Question 5: How do SURJ activists understand their roles in the racial justice movement?**
**Antiracist, not ally.** While previous studies conceptualized White people as allies to the racial justice movement, this study differentiated between the roles of ally and antiracist. All SURJ activists considered themselves as antiracist activists and organizers. Allyship was seen as a neoliberal concept embedded in problematic White savior ideologies. Participants critically reflected on the impact of neoliberalism and assumptions rooted in allyship. These insights underscore the importance of critical frameworks in activism and challenge the mainstream perspective that White allyship is inherently good. These findings also affirm the antiracist framework that White allyship is an unreliable and inconsistent mechanism for the racial justice movement. One participant described their psychological process of moving away from the concept of allyship:

> It has changed from wanting to be a helper to people who were disadvantaged or oppressed to understanding the dynamics of a wicked oppressive system, in which we are all losers, some of us much more than others and in different ways. I come from a more privileged background. But I'm still not whole because of the fact that there's such systemic racism. It would be moving from an ally to being in solidarity to being a co-conspirator. Does that make sense?

Domain 7 sheds light on *performative activism* and the negative impact of making assumptions from an allyship framework, including having a *harmful social impact as a White person* by undermining BIPOC leadership, imposing White cultural norms, and perpetuating harm through White solidarity. This domain contained the sole general theme in the current study, underscoring the pervasive nature of neoliberalism. *Social justice rhetoric, yet little action* further corroborates allyship as a form of performative activism. Participants highlighted the ways that Whites who frequently call themselves allies, or want to see themselves as allies, were
activated to show up to racial justice protests during the Summer of 2020. Participating in the 2020 George Floyd demonstrations was a popular and rewarding activity for many Americans during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown, particularly with social media circulating images of White allies and cross-racial solidarity. Yet, as the pandemic lifted, participation in antiracism dramatically decreased in subsequent years (Horowitz et al., 2023). Among the general population, these performative behaviors illustrated a lack of internal self-reflection and integrity around some of their social justice values.

At minimum, SURJ activists continued with their racial justice work, differentiating them from non-activist White populations. Participants highlighted Tema Okun (2021)’s paper on the key characteristics of White Supremacy Culture (WSC) as a guide to understanding the nuanced sociopolitical barriers that could undermine their antiracist commitment. Domain 8 underscores that recognizing how WSC manifests in daily life and learning how to counter these manifestations were key antiracist skills for SURJ activists. Participants were cognizant of the temptation to disengage from the racial justice movement, as the majority of White Americans did in 2021. SURJ activists highlighted the fact that White Supremacy is “based around comfort, convenience, and control” and “it’s hard to give that up.”

**Personal stakes.** Domain 8 highlights how participants came to understand their roles in the racial justice movement by understanding their personal stakes in achieving racial equity. Most SURJ activists described their personal stakes as a form of mutual or shared interest. This mutual interest encompassed understanding the short- and long-term losses as well as benefits that White communities would gain from achieving racial equity.

In terms of losses, participants identified the toxic effects of living in WSC, disconnection from their emotions and their histories, distorted self-image, misalignment of
values, and upholding dehumanizing stereotypes as reasons for divesting from Whiteness. Despite changes in the lives of SURJ activists, a major stagnant area was in their quality of relations with BIPOC. Domain 6 highlights how participants continued to have limited BIPOC relations due to entrenchment in White spaces. Although SURJ activists expressed a desire to have deeper and more authentic BIPOC relations, they disclosed a range of barriers including geographical and social distance (e.g., living in predominantly White spaces). Some participants felt that their emotional needs for connection were met through the SURJ community and did not feel motivated to create new relationships. Other participants disclosed that their anxieties about interacting with BIPOC increased as they became more aware of their Whiteness in multiracial spaces. Some participants were simply unwilling to be honest with BIPOC in addressing power dynamics, and this negatively impacted their relationships. A few participants attributed the lack of BIPOC connections to the public personas of BIPOC themselves (e.g., “you’re not really seeing who they are at church”). However, such displacement revealed the adoption of false consciousness and lack of self-awareness around their White power and privilege in social settings.

On the other side, several SURJ activists identified benefits to advancing racial equity, including advancing the intersecting goals of other social movements (e.g., economic, gender, climate justice), deeper and authentic connections to both Whites and BIPOC, and experiencing a shared sense of humanity with the world. Participants described a sense of spiritual fulfillment in living out their values (e.g., integrity, fairness) and being part of a cause that was bigger than themselves. A few SURJ activists expressed that they were still in their journeys to discovering their personal stakes in the movement. One participant compared SURJ to singing in a choir:
In a choir, we all have these voices. We all have to breathe. So you need someone to keep singing so that you can breathe. Then, you need to keep singing so that the next person can breathe…We're all going to keep singing to let each other breathe so that the work can continue uninterrupted. That has been an important impact of SURJ in my life - both in helping me to take steps forward and teaching me how to take care of myself in order to keep contributing to the work.

**Implications for Psychology Training Programs**

The findings of this study have several implications for psychology training programs. The lack of antiracist guidelines and frameworks in the field has been well documented in the literature (e.g., Malott et al., 2021; McCubbin et al., 2023; Wright et al., 2023). Diversity studies consistently reveal discrepant impacts between White and BIPOC trainees - with White students benefiting the most and BIPOC students experiencing lower perceptions of multicultural training (Chao et al., 2011; Gregus et al., 2020; Tomlinson-Clarke, 2013). Moreover, a “backlash” effect of increased racial prejudice among White trainees can result following diversity trainings (Trenerry et al., 2010). Efforts to address the impact of Whiteness and White Supremacy also remain limited and ineffective.

One of the central aims of this study was to discover antiracist guidelines and frameworks that training programs could construct and adapt from the experiences, motivations, and practices of SURJ. Based on these findings, psychology training programs may want to utilize the following 10 guidelines, as listed below.

First, programs may want to structure training by facilitating White and BIPOC processes separately and, at times, facilitating the training of both groups together. Based on this study’s finding, it is recommended that programs introduce the rationale that White and BIPOC groups
have historically and politically been positioned to different places in a White Supremacy society, which can lead to differential outcomes in terms of each group’s level of racial awareness and critical consciousness. International students may have different racialization processes and positionalities compared to domestic students, due to a lack of familiarity with different communities of color and the American sociopolitical context. It may therefore be useful to create another process group for international students.

Presenting the above information may already begin to evoke reactions of denial and defensiveness, especially for White trainees. In such cases, programs may want to jump to the third guideline on processing White fragility regulatory responses.

It is important to note that SURJ activists underscored an ethical responsibility for White individuals to conduct most of their internal work and self-reflection before entering multiracial spaces, even as racial justice activists. This practice by SURJ was not intended to shame Whites but to acknowledge the stark reality of being positioned into a dominant racial group in Western society. To that end, it is recommended that training programs follow SURJ’s ethical practices and organize some of their training based on race. In particular, psychology’s ethical principle to “do no harm” aligns with this guideline.

For most Whites, having the opportunity to honestly engage in racial conversations with other Whites will likely foster deeper self and group reflection around the meaning of Whiteness and antiracism. As findings revealed, engaging in these conversations remains taboo among White communities, with potential backlash (e.g., ostracization) when the topic is initiated even by another White peer. A powerful way to break with White solidarity and to shift away from White Supremacy Culture is to normalize having these honest conversations and to carve out
more antiracist counter-spaces to do so. Creating antiracist solidarity as a group can be fostered in such structured settings.

Second, training should begin by decentering Whiteness through the use of qualitative inquiry and Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS). For example, programs could clearly define the meaning of Whiteness, White Supremacy, and White Supremacy Culture in their curricula. They can highlight the historical relationship between White Supremacy and the field of psychology as well as antiracist movements to diverge from this relationship. Subsequently, training programs could introduce and incorporate oppositional scholarship to White epistemology, such as critical race theories and the concept of spatial justice.

In addition, critical frameworks that move beyond the Black-White binary of race in the United States would be important to teach (e.g., racial triangulation theory which highlights the positioning of Asian Americans in the binary). Although Black subjugation has been foundational to maintaining White Supremacy throughout history, understanding how non-Black and non-White groups are also oppressed, excluded, and invisibilized can illuminate the nuanced ways through which White Supremacy powerfully shifts and maintains its power. For example, through racial assimilation, internalized racism, or conflict among communities of color.

Third, programs can create a structured space to help process White fragility regulatory responses for White trainees only. Simultaneously, they can create a space for BIPOC trainees to process the need for antiracist oppositional scholarship and what impact White hegemonic education and training has had on them. Training programs should warn all trainees that the topic of Whiteness and oppositional scholarship may evoke feelings of denial, fear, and defensiveness - all natural reactions after lifelong socialization into a colorblind White Supremacy society.
Fourth, programs can introduce and practice psychological tools to help White trainees manage their fragility reactions, such as DBT antiracism and somatic practices. Training facilitators should normalize this process without an environment of shaming. Trainees should be encouraged to find their own ways of managing White fragility responses, which should be facilitated without the presence of BIPOC trainees. This is due to the potential displacement of White fragility reactions onto BIPOC, a phenomenon that has been illustrated in the literature and within multiracial activist spaces (e.g., Gorski & Erakat, 2019).

Fifth, programs can introduce Feagin (2020)’s framework of frontstage and backstage White culture to foster critical consciousness among all trainees. In particular, this framework can help White trainees process and resolve their cognitive dissonance as a result of growing up in a colorblind, racist society. Subsequently, programs can facilitate self and group reflections on what being a racialized person in the United States means for each trainee. For White trainees, reflecting on how they have engaged in White solidarity throughout their lives will be an important area to also explore.

Sixth, programs can introduce and teach the concepts of spatial justice and antiracist counter-spaces as well as how to use these spaces to advance their practices. For instance, training programs can facilitate “Calling In” workshops to help White trainees hold difficult racial dialogues with other Whites. Programs can also work in partnership with racial justice organizations like SURJ to facilitate more training and workshops as well as to build community outside the classroom. For trainees who are new to racial justice, this will begin to cultivate a sense of belonging and communality for antiracist work.

Seventh, programs can facilitate historical ancestry projects aimed at helping trainees learn about the origins of Whiteness, White assimilation, the meaning of Whiteness, and what
accountability as a White individual can look like today. Simultaneously, they can facilitate historical ancestry projects for BIPOC trainees to critically analyze the racialized lives they have led and what racial oppression has looked like for their historical communities (e.g., moments of assimilation into the rewards of Whiteness).

Eighth, training should incorporate colorblind intersectionality as a framework to help White trainees process the impact of their Whiteness on their intersectional identities. Subsequently, this framework can help trainees identify potential shared motivations for antiracist work with communities of color. In addition, programs should incorporate more BIPOC scholarship into their curricula with the aim of being cognizant and critical of the White Racial Frame in any intersectionality work.

Ninth, programs can help trainees differentiate between the roles of ally and antiracist and the historical foundations of these concepts (e.g., neoliberalism frameworks). They can also emphasize the importance of continuously using critical frameworks and theories in antiracist work for Whites, especially around their roles in advancing racial equity. Furthermore, training programs can help trainees clearly identify their interest convergence in the racial justice movement through historical accounts, individual reflexivity exercises, and group discussions.

Finally, programs can educate White trainees on potential harmful dynamics and patterns that can often emerge between White and BIPOC groups. They should emphasize continuous internal reflection for all trainees and model some of the daily antiracist practices of SURJ (e.g., bidirectional cycle between self-reflection and action). Diversity training programs have the potential to inoculate all trainees against White Supremacy Culture and, for White trainees, from internalizing harmful attitudes of racial superiority in society.

**Limitations of Current Study**
As much as qualitative researchers remain true to the methodological parameters of their research, there will be some limitations that must be acknowledged. First, participants were recruited through snowball sampling technique conducted by reaching out to SURJ statewide chapters. The study required participants to be official SURJ members who were active in their statewide chapters for at least two years. A few individuals who were neither racial justice activists nor members of SURJ contacted the principal investigator. It could be inferred that participant self-selection may not be the most accurate barometer of activist commitment level.

Second, the interviews with participants were conducted virtually over Zoom by the principal investigator. Although interviews without the face-to-face component have been shown to promote more honest responses (Hill et al., 2005), the interviewer was unable to gauge any non-verbal response by participants. Given that non-verbal responses could provide insight into participant responses, this lack of face-to-face interaction was a limitation. However, the primary researcher’s visible identity as an Asian American would have likely impacted the responses given by White participants. Given extensive research on the backstage culture of White racism (Feagin, 2020), the research team decided that it would be more effective to conduct the interviews without a visual component.

Third, while the research team adhered strictly to CQR procedures and checks on their biases, it is nevertheless possible that idiosyncratic attitudes impacted some of the data analyses. Researchers may also want to explore whether using artificial intelligence in qualitative research might be beneficial in terms of additional audits and checks on human biases.

Despite these limitations, the present study provides insights into a national racial justice activist group with widespread reach across the United States. Showing Up for Racial Justice
(SURJ) continues to grow in its membership base with hundreds of statewide chapters, working
groups, and affiliates across the country.

**Future Directions for Research**

Themes from this study suggest important future directions for racial justice activism and
diversity training programs. This study is unique in that the motivations, experiences, and
practices of White activists were examined in order to understand how diversity training
programs could construct and adapt antiracist frameworks. This study also provides best
practices for racial justice organizations seeking to advance antiracism. Future studies could
build upon this study by examining White activists in other racial justice organizations.
Researchers could also look at White activists in multiracial grassroots organizing to compare
the similarities and differences with SURJ activists.

Most participants were highly educated. Despite the researcher’s attempts to recruit
participants from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds, most activists were of higher education
and socioeconomic statuses. Given the importance of intersectionality, researchers may want to
explore effective ways to recruit individuals from poor, working-class, and rural backgrounds. In
general, making studies accessible to this population is an important consideration.

Although a few participants held leadership positions in SURJ, most activists in this
study were general (i.e., rank-and-file) members. Studies may want to examine White activists at
higher levels of leadership (e.g., its co-founders, national directors) to understand the different
perspectives and challenges they face, especially in terms of navigating their own power as
Whites and within the organization as leaders. It is likely that their life experiences and choices
differ, in terms of earlier exposure to diverse settings as well as authentic relations to BIPOC in
their lives. Studying this group could inform how SURJ collaborates and partners with BIPOC-led organizations in addition to the decision-making processes involved.

Researchers could also examine activists through focus groups rather than individual participants. Group dynamics may shed light on how SURJ members organize together as activists, how differences are negotiated, and the influence of intersectional identities among members. Focus groups could also reveal how White Supremacy Culture is reenacted or disrupted in these counter-spaces. There is little research on the efficacy of Whites engaging in honest conversations about their Whiteness in group settings. Future studies could examine the impact and efficacy of facilitating such conversations among White trainees.

In this study, intersectional identities emerged as important factors in shaping participants’ racial identities. The study included a multiracial SURJ activist who self-identified as White. This participant shared insights about their process of racial assimilation and how their psychology shifted, disclosing that “something was being cultivated in me” from how White-passing she became. Exploring the psychological changes behind ethnic groups that are currently assimilating and categorizing themselves into the White race (e.g., White Latinx populations) will be a fruitful area to explore. Studies could elaborate on these findings by using CQR to analyze the narratives of activists based on specific intersectional identities.

Studies could also examine coping strategies to manage White fragility employed by activists and identify coping mechanisms yielding the most integrated antiracist development. More research is needed to understand the various antiracist processes that racial justice activists experience throughout their lives. Clarifying the elements of these statuses, as well as challenges that lead to stagnation, will enable theorists to fine-tune the antiracist developmental models.
The use of qualitative inquiry to learn about this population of grassroots activists in Showing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ) expands upon previous literature focused on White antiracism and racial justice practices in the United States. SURJ activists identified ways in which their worldviews, their identities, their relationships, and their activism changed over time. As a result, quantitative studies examining various outcome variables for these activists could yield informative results. Longitudinal studies following participants from childhood into adulthood could yield additional insights on White antiracism. Studies could also expand upon the scope of this study by examining antiracist activism on a more international scale.

Overall, SURJ activists shared complex insights and saw their participation in the current study as an integral part of their responsibilities as White people. Research could integrate these findings directly to psychology training programs by examining the impact of SURJ antiracist frameworks on White trainees. Studies could also compare the efficacy of SURJ practices to diversity training models and workshops outside the field of psychology.

**Conclusion**

When we talk about White Supremacy, we acknowledge a system that was built to maintain power using Whiteness as key to that power. One could argue that this key could have been any type of supremacy. Certainly, other supremacies have existed throughout history and continue to exist throughout the world. However, White Supremacy continues to be the major mode of establishing and maintaining power in the West. Even with social progress in the United States, institutions and practices remain entrenched in White Supremacy ideologies and culture. In this study, although SURJ activists acknowledged a system that they could not fully escape from, they chose to take great personal responsibility for these wrongs. The psychological burden among activists was heavy, and the prospects of being “cleansed” of this “original sin”
(i.e., being born White) appeared bleak until they found an antiracist home in Showing Up for Racial Justice.

Critical Whiteness Studies theorizes that Whiteness can be broken and deconstructed for the betterment of humanity (Nayak, 2007). Using similar theories of change, SURJ answered the historic call of BIPOC activists to organize their own communities into the racial justice movement. By actively creating counter-spaces of resistance and building upon spatial justice praxis, SURJ facilitated the antiracist development of Whites and cultivated ongoing opportunities for self-reflection, action, and integration of values in a society deeply opposed to racial justice progress. As the field of psychology continues to be defined by White Supremacy Culture, applying this study’s recommended frameworks and guidelines can facilitate the antiracist development of White trainees and those in multiracial spaces conducting antiracist work. It can shift the dominant culture away from Whiteness and towards creating racial equity for all communities. Given psychology’s commitment to the public good, integrating such frameworks seems critical to fulfilling its social justice principles. To that end, these findings hold the potential to contribute to the advancement of racial equity in diversity training programs. In general, fields of study and society can learn a great deal more from the experiences, motivations, and practices of this population of grassroots activists.
References


Coalition of Anti-Racist Whites (2020). [https://www.carw.org](https://www.carw.org)


113


122


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domains</th>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Shame and Challenging Emotions</td>
<td>Experiencing a cocktail of shame.</td>
<td>Typical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Using strong defense mechanisms to regain racial comfort.</td>
<td>Variant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Learning to process challenging emotions.</td>
<td>Rare</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. The Racist Backstage and Colorblind Frontstage</td>
<td>Growing up in racist backstage and performing in colorblind frontstage.</td>
<td>Typical</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Engaging in beliefs about White exceptionalism.</td>
<td>Variant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Politically active parents who never referenced race.</td>
<td>Rare</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Finding Community in SURJ</td>
<td>SURJ as a structured space to gain community belonging.</td>
<td>Typical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Deconstructing Whiteness and becoming accountable.</td>
<td>Variant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Community as helpful but not fundamental.</td>
<td>Rare</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Intersections</td>
<td>Applying intersectional lens on marginalized identities but not on Whiteness.</td>
<td>Variant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Intergenerational oppression leading to White assimilation.</td>
<td>Variant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Centering social class analysis among White communities.</td>
<td>Variant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>White bodies monitored by WSC.</td>
<td>Variant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Utilizing Counter-spaces outside SURJ</td>
<td>Learning from BIPOC leaders, scholars, and activists.</td>
<td>Typical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Re-education about the history of race leading to critical consciousness.</td>
<td>Variant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Learning from parallel frameworks.</td>
<td>Variant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. BIPOC Relations</td>
<td>Unwillingness to be honest with BIPOC in addressing power dynamics.</td>
<td>Variant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Continued stereotyping of BIPOC, despite increased education.</td>
<td>Variant</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Limited BIPOC relations due to entrenchment in White spaces.</td>
<td>Variant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Performative Activism</td>
<td>Harmful social impact as a White person.</td>
<td>General</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Engaging in subtle forms of White solidarity.</td>
<td>Variant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social justice rhetoric, yet little action.</td>
<td>Variant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Beyond Neoliberal Constructs of White Allyship</td>
<td>Recognizing how WSC manifests in daily life.</td>
<td>Typical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bidirectional cycle between self-reflection and action.</td>
<td>Variant</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Aligning life values with antiracist goals.</td>
<td>Variant</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Understanding personal stakes in the racial justice movement.</td>
<td>Variant</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Engaging in conversations with Whites about their Whiteness.</td>
<td>Variant</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. N=14. General=13-14, Typical=8-12, Variant=2-7, Rare=1. #=number of cases in category. WSC=White Supremacy Culture. BIPOC=Black, Indigenous, People of Color.
Appendix A
Interview Protocol

1. Can you tell me how you initially became involved with Showing Up for Racial Justice?
   a. What got you started in this work?
   b. How has your involvement changed over time?
2. Please describe your early background and upbringing.
   a. For example: family background, neighborhoods, schools, etc.
3. What assumptions or biases have you made in your life about other racial groups?
   a. How have they changed (if at all) in SURJ?
4. What assumptions have you made in your life about other White people?
   a. How have they changed (if at all) in SURJ?
5. When did you first become aware of being White?
   a. Who or what influenced that awareness?
   b. What feelings did you initially have with this awareness?
6. What emotions have you grappled with the most in your journey as a White person?
   a. What were they associated with?
   b. How did you manage any intense feelings?
7. In what ways has Whiteness shaped or intersected with your other identities?
   a. In what ways has Whiteness shaped your personal relationships?
8. What does White Supremacy mean to you?
   a. What do you think is the biggest challenge to dismantling attitudes of racial
      superiority or dominance?
9. What does antiracism mean to you?
   a. Has antiracism changed any of your life choices?
   b. Has antiracism changed any of your relationships?
10. What motivates you to continue doing this work?
11. Complete this sentence: Whiteness is ______.
12. Is there anything else you think is important to share with me about SURJ or yourself?
Appendix B
Demographic Questionnaire

We recognize that not all categories may capture all identities and characteristics. As a result, we included open-ended options per category.

1. Current age:

2. U.S. state you were born:

3. Gender/gender identity:
   a. Cisgender man, not transgender
   b. Cisgender woman, not transgender
   c. Man of transgender experience (Trans man, Transsexual man, FtM)
   d. Woman of transgender experience (Trans woman, Transsexual woman, MtF)
   e. Genderqueer
   f. Please specify if not listed:

4. Sexual orientation(s):
   a. Straight
   b. Gay
   c. Lesbian
   d. Bisexual
   e. Pansexual
   f. Polysexual
   g. Asexual
   h. Demisexual
   i. Please specify if not listed:

5. Race(s):
   a. White, non-Latinx
   b. Native American
   c. Arab/Middle Eastern
   d. Asian/Pacific Islander
   e. Black
   g. Biracial/Multiracial
   h. Please specify if not listed:

6. Ethnicities:

7. Household(s) you grew up in:
   a. Single parent
   b. Both parents
   c. Adopted parent(s)
   d. Please specify if not listed:
8. Religious affiliation(s):
   a. Catholic
   b. Christian
   c. Jewish
   d. Buddhist
   e. Muslim
   f. Hindi
   g. Spiritual, not religious
   h. Atheist
   i. Agnostic
   j. Please specify if not listed:

9. Highest education obtained:
   a. Some high school or less
   b. High school
   c. Some college
   d. Two-year college degree
   e. Bachelor’s degree
   f. Some postgraduate work
   g. Postgraduate degree (e.g., MA, PhD, JD, MD)

10. Current employment status:
    a. Full-time
    b. Part-time
    c. Unemployed
    d. Retired

11. Current profession:

12. Current social class:
    a. Upper class
    b. Upper-middle class
    c. Middle class
    d. Working class
    e. Poverty

13. Estimated annual income:
    a. Less than 19K
    b. 20-34K
    c. 35-49 K
    d. 50-74K
    e. 75-99K
    f. 100-149K
    g. 150-199K
    h. More than 200K
14. Environment you currently reside in:
   a. Urban
   b. Suburban
   c. Rural

15. How long have you been a member of SURJ?
   a. 1-2 years
   b. 3-5 years
   c. 6-8 years
   d. 9-12 years

16. What projects are you working on in SURJ?

17. Please list your roles in the project, if any:
Appendix C
Recruitment Email

Subject title: Recruiting SURJ Members for Dissertation Study

You are invited to participate in a dissertation study exploring the experiences of White racial justice grassroots activists in the United States. This dissertation study by principal investigator Tina R. Lee, MA has been approved by Teachers College Institutional Review Board (IRB protocol #22-078). The study aims to understand the motivations, beliefs, and strategies of White activists who are actively involved in the racial justice movement.

To participate, you must be at least:

- 18 years old
- U.S. citizen
- Identify as racially White
- SURJ member for at least 2 years

If you meet inclusion criteria, you will first complete a brief demographic survey and then participate in an individual 1-2 hour semi-structured interview via video or phone with the principal investigator. Confidentiality of your personal identity, participation, and experiences will be maintained by the principal investigator, under IRB guidelines. Informed consent and procedures will be further explained during the screening process.

If you are interested in participating, please email principal investigator Tina R. Lee at trl2127@tc.edu with your name, local SURJ chapter, and number of years you have been involved with SURJ.

Your participation will potentially contribute to better understanding the psychology of racism and antiracism in the United States. Thank you for your interest!

Tina R. Lee, MA
Doctoral Candidate
Counseling Psychology
Teachers College, Columbia University
trl2127@tc.edu
Appendix D
Informed Consent

TEACHERS COLLEGE
COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY
525 West 120th St. New York, NY 10027
212-678-3000 | www.tc.columbia.edu

INFORMED CONSENT

Title: A Qualitative Examination of White Racial Justice Grassroots Activists in America
Principal Researcher: Tina R. Lee, MA
914-417-8391, trl2127@tc.edu

INTRODUCTION
You are invited to participate in this research study called “A Qualitative Examination of White Racial Justice Grassroots Activists in America.” You may qualify to take part in this research study because you are at least 18 years old, an American citizen, identify as racially White, and have been a member of the organization Showing Up For Racial Justice (“SURJ”) for at least two years. Approximately 15 people will participate in this study. It will take 2 hours to complete over the course of one day.

WHY IS THIS STUDY BEING DONE?
This study is being done to examine the experiences of White American racial justice grassroots activists and their identities, values, motivations, and goals in the broader racial justice movement. Qualitative studies focused on the specific experiences of White racial justice activists remain rare.

WHAT WILL I BE ASKED TO DO IF I AGREE TO TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY?
After meeting inclusion criteria, if you decide to participate, you will be given an informed consent to read and sign. The interview will be audio-recorded over Zoom and deleted after it is transcribed. If you do not wish to be audio-recorded, you will not be able to participate. The interview will take approximately 1 to 2 hours. Throughout the study, you will be assigned a pseudonym and a de-identified number in order to keep your identity confidential. You will also be provided an electronic copy of your signed informed consent. You will complete a brief demographic form before your interview takes place. You will be encouraged to ask questions before, during, and after the interview and to contact the principal investigator should you have any questions or wish to withdraw from the study. There may be some psychological discomfort with discussing race and racial identity, a topic that has been shown to generally elicit emotions. The interview will be stopped if you tell the principal investigator that you wish to discontinue. Direct benefits may include increased psychological insight and understanding on one’s racial identity and culture. Participating may also be considered by some individuals as contributing to the broader racial justice movement in the United States due to the aims of the present study. You will not be financially compensated for your participation.

WHAT POSSIBLE RISKS OR DISCOMFORTS CAN I EXPECT FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?
This is a minimal risk study, which means the harms or discomforts that you may experience are not greater than you would ordinarily encounter in daily life while taking routine physical or psychological examinations or tests. However, there are some risks to consider. You might feel uncomfortable and experience strong feelings when discussing your

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experiences of race and related topics. You do not have to answer any questions or share anything you do not want to talk about. You can stop participating in the study at any time without penalty. Your information will be kept confidential. The primary researcher is taking precautions to keep your information confidential and prevent anyone from discovering or guessing your identity, such as using a pseudonym and a de-identified number instead of your name and keeping all information on a password protected computer and locked in a file drawer.

WHAT POSSIBLE BENEFITS CAN I EXPECT FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY? There are no direct benefits for participating in this study. Participation may increase knowledge in the field of psychology.

WILL I BE PAID FOR BEING IN THIS STUDY? You will not be paid to participate. There are no costs to you for taking part in this study.

WHEN IS THE STUDY OVER? CAN I LEAVE THE STUDY BEFORE IT ENDS? The study is over when you have completed the informed consent, demographics form, and individual interview. However, you can leave the study at any time even if you have not finished.

PROTECTION OF YOUR CONFIDENTIALITY The primary researcher will keep all written materials locked in a desk drawer in a locked office. Any electronic or digital information (including audio recordings) will be stored on a computer that is password protected. What is on the audio recording will be written down and the audio recording will then be destroyed. There will be no record matching your real name with your pseudonym. For quality assurance, the study team, the study sponsor, and/or members of Teachers College Institutional Review Board (IRB) may review the data collected from you as part of this study. Otherwise, all information obtained from your participation in this study will be held strictly confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by U.S. or State law.

HOW WILL THE RESULTS BE USED? The results of this study may be published in journals and presented at academic conferences in the future. Your identity will be removed from any data you provide before publication or use for educational purposes. Your name or any identifying information about you will not be published. This study is being conducted as part of the dissertation of the primary researcher.

CONSENT FOR AUDIO RECORDING Audio recording is part of this study. You can choose whether to give permission to be recorded. If you decide that you don’t wish to be recorded, you will not be able to participate in this study.

_____ I give my consent to be recorded

__________________________
Signature


I do not consent to be recorded

Signature

WHO MAY VIEW MY PARTICIPATION IN THIS STUDY

I consent to allow written materials viewed at an educational setting or at a conference outside of Teachers College, Columbia University.

Signature

I do not consent to allow written materials viewed outside of Teachers College, Columbia University.

Signature

OPTIONAL CONSENT FOR FUTURE CONTACT
The primary researcher may wish to contact you in the future. Please initial below to indicate whether or not you give permission for future contact. The researcher may contact me in the future for information relating to this current study:

Yes ___________ No ___________

Initial Initial

WHO CAN ANSWER MY QUESTIONS ABOUT THIS STUDY?
If you have any questions about taking part in this study, you should contact the primary researcher, Tina R. Lee, 914-417-8391 or trl2127@tc.edu

If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject, you should contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) (the human research ethics committee) at 212-678-4105 or email IRB@tc.edu or you can write to the IRB at Teachers College, Columbia University, 525 W. 120th Street, New York, NY 10027, Box 151. IRB is the committee that oversees human research protection for Teachers College.
PARTICIPANT'S RIGHTS

- I have read the Informed Consent Form and have been offered the opportunity to discuss the form with the researcher.
- I have had ample opportunity to ask questions about the purposes, procedures, risks and benefits regarding this research study.
- I understand that my participation is voluntary. I may refuse to participate or withdraw participation at any time without penalty.
- The researcher may withdraw me from the research at the researcher’s professional discretion.
- If, during the course of the study, significant new information that has been developed becomes available which may relate to my willingness to continue my participation, the researcher will provide this information to me.
- Any information derived from the research study that personally identifies me will not be voluntarily released or disclosed without my separate consent, except as specifically required by law.
- Identifiers may be removed from the data. De-identified data may be used for future research studies.
- I should receive a copy of the Informed Consent Form document.

My signature means that I agree to participate in this study:

Print name: ______________________________ Date: __________________

Signature: ________________________________