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Sociology of whiteness: Feminist perceptions of race

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THE SOCIOLOGY OF WHITENESS: FEMINIST PERCEPTIONS OF
RACE

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Sociology
San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by

Anna Muraco

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ABSTRACT

THE SOCIOLOGY OF WHITENESS: FEMINIST PERCEPTIONS OF RACE

By Anna Muraco

This research addresses how self-identifying white feminist women currently involved in activist organizations serving to promote the needs of women perceive how whiteness affects their lives. Building upon the theoretical constructs of whiteness examined in previous research, this study employs the belief that while white women can identify racial oppression, they do not recognize that they are the benefactors of white privilege.

By interviewing the targeted white feminist population, this researcher finds that perceptions differ according to the length and organizational structure of the individual's activism. One group of feminists (liberal) is more likely to view racism as a matter of individual attitudes while their counterparts (anti-racists) view racial oppression as structural. The way each group comprehends racism directly affects their understanding of whiteness. While many of the feminist activists identify whiteness as a position affording them privilege, others believe that being white skinned is a liability hindering their progress.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The fact that I'm white I'm very aware of, and there are situations where that can be a benefit, and definitely, there are situations where it isn't a benefit...There are more situations where I don't have any opportunity because I am white.-Pam, age 24ⁱ

I looked at myself and I said "unless I am very careful, every time I make a decision, whether it is accepting a job or if it is accepting a privilege at a retail store, I must always be aware of that every second of the day, I have privilege as a white person. ..It really disturbs me because I find myself so easily slipping into accepting privilege and seeking privilege knowing that I can network in a way that nobody else can.-Lucy, age 46

Studies of racism in U.S. society typically examine the attributes of various racial groups that result in their economic, political, and social subordination. This traditional approach places the responsibility of changing the nature of U.S. race relations on people of color, rather than on the dominant white majority. These analyses lack an understanding of how racism shapes the identity of "whiteness" as a position of privilege within U.S. society. This omission allows whites a standpoint of racial neutrality² through an assumption of whiteness as the norm against which all else is measured. The definition of

whiteness used here is from Ruth Frankenberg's White Women, Race Matters (1993) which states that first, whiteness is a location of structural advantage, of race privilege. Second, it is a "standpoint," a place from which white people look at ourselves, at others, and at society. Third, whiteness refers to a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed (p. 1). Because racism affects all societal members, examining white people's attitudes and roles in maintaining racial inequality begins our active involvement in understanding race discourse more fully and allows us to recognize white members' responsibility in society for racism's perpetuation or eradication.

Naming whiteness as a social identity helps shift the definition of racism in this context from overt acts of hatred and prejudice to the overall privilege afforded white people due to their membership in the dominant racial group. Central to this view is an understanding of the means by which the racial status quo is maintained by people who believe in racial equality yet who also defend their race advantage. Some feminist analyses examine gender privilege and inequality in a similar manner.

Feminist theory asserts that the economic, social, and political position of U.S. women historically has been limited by the legal sanctioning of their exclusion from

power. A comprehension of how sexism functions in relation to male privilege (particularly the overempowerment of men in the United States), helps to clarify how racism functions in relation to white privilege. While dominant group members in both scenarios admit that these forms of oppression exist, recognizing that personal privilege results from this form of inequality seems more difficult to face, since such a realization implies responsibility for providing a solution by sacrificing ownership of the power structure.

Many parallels between race and sex privilege present a complex standpoint for white women. Due to a legacy of oppression in America, most people in society expect white women to possess greater racial tolerance than white men, especially in light of the gains that women activists have helped make for marginalized people. While their contributions to movements for the oppressed (i.e. the Abolition and Civil Rights Movement) have been significant, white women have also acted as oppressors of people of color when pursuing improvement in the status of women in the United States.

In the second phase of the Women's Movement in the 1970s, for example, issues crucial to women of color were neglected in the mainstream middle class white feminism that

propelled the movement. For the past two decades, said attempts have been made to eradicate the hierarchical structure of previous feminist activity that resulted in the improvement of white middle class women's social positions while women of color reaped minimal benefits. In academia especially, contemporary feminist issues ring true only if they include the interests of all women, including those of marginalized races, classes, ages, and sexual orientations (Rich, 1974). Although academic scholarship acknowledges the volatile relationship between feminism and women of color, few studies examine the extent to which white women promote the racial status quo. How whiteness affects white feminist activist women's perceptions of race and racism is the focus of this research. The purpose of studying this particular group is to continue examining the role of whiteness in shaping the lives and experiences of white women and ultimately to discover how the recent emphasis of feminist organizations and scholarship on deconstructing the hegemonic nature of white feminism affects current attitudes about whiteness.³ The women studied here claim to desire universal equality; however, many of them minimize the role of whiteness in their own lives, characterizing it more as a liability than a privilege. This research also uncovers, through the process of extensive interviewing, that while

these women are quick to identify sexism as a problem embedded in the social structure, racism is more commonly believed to be a problem of individual attitudes, indicating a misperception of the depth of racial oppression in the United States.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF PREVIOUS LITERATURE

Whiteness as a Racial Identity

The problem of racism in America has been examined from varying political, economic, and social perspectives, and has emerged with few concrete solutions. Simply stating that racism is inherent in the social structure does little to begin its eradication. In her book, White Awareness, Judith Katz likens racism to an epidemic caused by a white society that has the sole responsibility of finding the cure:

Racism is a White problem in that its development and perpetuation rests with White people. Whites created racism through the establishment of policies and practices that serve to their advantage and benefit and continue to oppress all minorities in the United States. Racism is perpetuated by Whites through their conscious and/or unconscious support of a culture and institutions that are founded on racist policies and practices...the "race problem" in America is essentially a White problem in that it is Whites who developed it, perpetuate it, and have the power to resolve it (1978, p. 10).

Katz implies that because racism is a white problem, its elimination is the responsibility of white people. This perspective greatly differs from the common belief that fighting oppression is the responsibility of the oppressed,

in this case, people of color (Katz, 1981). Because whites are the benefactors of discrimination against non-whites and are allowed to remain unaware of their unearned privilege at the expense of people of color, their responsibility is not acknowledged (Gallagher, 1995). Dismantling the race hierarchy in the United States lies, in part, in identifying how being white skinned affects the development of oppressive attitudes.

In the past two decades, the racial identity of white skinned individuals has become a focal point of antiracist academics (Frankenberg, 1994; Weis & Fine, 1996). Anti-racist scholarship denotes a scholar's admission that her status as a white woman perpetuates the oppression of non-white groups. In this recognition, the anti-racist scholar acknowledges her responsibility in dismantling the race hierarchy through her work. The study of whiteness has evolved as a reaction to challenges from people of color to examine the role of white people in perpetuating racial oppression in the United States. Black academics provide the basis for analyzing the position of whites in the U.S., a tradition passed on from the early works of W.E.B. du Bois who constructs his own identity in response to his treatment by the dominant white society of the late nineteenth century.⁴ Especially prominent in analyzing the role of

whiteness in the United States are black writers, including James Baldwin who suggests that white identity exists only by definition of being not black (Baldwin, 1984). In naming whiteness as "other" to blackness (i.e. not black), it should not be assumed that this identity emerges only from white/black conflict. Whiteness is the identity associated with having white skin. The status associated with whiteness in a highly race conscious society such as the United States implies that all groups that are not classified as white skinned help shape the identity of whiteness as "not other."⁵ This orientation is exemplified by the accounts of many individuals who feel that as a white person in the United States they have no cultural identity, and can identify their position only in contrast to what is different from themselves. In her analysis of literary tradition, Toni Morrison (1996) also examines the tendency to define "whiteness" simply as the opposite of "blackness":

For reasons that should not need explanation here, until very recently, and regardless of the race of the author, the readers of virtually all American fiction have been positioned as white...What does positioning one's writerly self, in the wholly racialized society that is the United States, as unraced and all others as raced entail (1992, p. xxi)?

By questioning the tendency to situate the literate U.S. population and all writers of literature as homogeneously white, Morrison addresses the greater problem of racializing

only those who are not white skinned, thus rendering whiteness as an unnamed norm. In her examination of the nature of whiteness as the norm in fiction, Morrison illuminates a similar problem inherent in the larger social order.

People of color are not alone in discussing the role of whiteness in the U.S. In the 1970s and 1980s, David Wellman (1994) also explored the racial identity associated with being white skinned. Published in Portraits of White Racism, Wellman interviewed both male and female informants about their contact with and ideas about race, and his conclusions indicate that race plays a complex role throughout the lives of white people. Wellman's narrators demonstrate an awareness of race prejudice, but conversely lack an awareness of how whiteness creates an advantage in their own lives. By removing themselves from the system of racial organization (as whites, they are allowed to assume racial invisibility), the narrators maintain their racial advantage through the very ability to ignore their race and thus perpetuate the racial hierarchy inherent in the United States .

Ruth Frankenberg also discusses white privilege and the complexity of whiteness as a racial identity in her book White Women, Race Matters. Whiteness, Frankenberg asserts,

is a location of structural advantage that shapes the way individuals perceive and operate in society, and which affords privileges that often go unrecognized by whites because whiteness is perceived as the norm against which all else is measured (1993). Further, "the term whiteness signals the production and reproduction of dominance rather than subordination, normativity rather than marginality, and privilege rather than disadvantage" (p. 237). In analyzing the absence of race discourse in feminist works produced from the Women's Liberation Movement, Frankenberg outlines the complex process (both individual and societal) of evolving toward a contemporary way of viewing race:

The first shift, then, is from a moment that I will call 'essentialist racism,' with its emphasis on race difference understood in hierarchical terms of essential, biological inequality, to a discourse of essential 'same-ness' popularly referred to as color-blindness--which I have chosen to name as a double move toward 'color evasiveness' and 'power evasiveness.' This second moment asserts that we are all the same under the skin; that culturally, we are converging; that, materially, we all have the same chances in U.S. society; and that--any failure to achieve is therefore the fault of people of color themselves. The third moment insists once again on difference, but in a form very different from that of the first moment. Where the terms of essentialist racism were set by the white dominant culture, in the third moment, they are articulated by people of color. Where difference within the terms of essentialist racism alleges the inferiority of people of color, in the third moment difference signals autonomy of culture, values, aesthetic standards, and so on. And, of course, inequality in this third moment refers not to ascribed characteristics, but to the social structure. I will

refer to this discursive repertoire as one of "race cognizance (1991, p. 15).

Frankenberg's explanation of these shifting and interacting processes reveals how racially tolerant, well meaning white women may continue to perpetuate racial inequality and privilege by internalizing color and power discursive assertions, and never may progress to a race cognizant perspective.

Theories of Racial Formation

To support the work of both Frankenberg and Wellman, the argument that racial identities, white or non-white,⁶ shape how individuals view and are viewed in the world must be established. While various studies of the biological distinctions between racial groups⁷ have received much recent publicity, a more convincing sociological theory asserts that any biological definition of racial categories emerges from a given social and historical period for the purposes of classifying groups either as white, or as outsiders (Blauner, 1989; Feagin, 1993; Omi & Winant, 1994; Roediger, 1994). As such, race must be viewed as an element of social structure rather than as an irregularity within it (Omi & Winant, 1994). All societal members are subjected to

these ideological constructs of race and are indoctrinated with the rules of racial classification, both of others and of themselves, which serve as a determinant of whether one fits within the dominant social structure or is relegated to "other" status. The pervasive nature of this ideology leads to its internalization through socialization and interaction with all social institutions including the American educational system and the mass media (Omi & Winant, 1994).

Some sociologists term the position of white dominance in the United States a racial dictatorship with the consequences of defining American identity as white, organizing the color line as a fundamental division in society, and consolidating the oppositional racial consciousness (Omi & Winant, 1994). To evade the responsibility for maintaining the resulting race advantage by indicting themselves or the social system, many whites argue that racial inequality is created by characteristics of the non-white groups that impede their success (Blauner, 1989). This argument serves the dual purpose of justifying the dominant position of whites in the race hierarchy and removing any responsibility to remedy inequality on the part of both individual white people and the American social structure (Blauner, 1989; Omi & Winant, 1994). Only through a conscious effort to negate this indoctrination and pursue

through a conscious effort to negate this indoctrination and pursue fundamental social change that acknowledges white privilege can we remedy the resulting inequality in society and dismantle this systematic domination.

From Abolitionism to Suffrage

Many theories of oppression name race and sex oppression as analogous. Linking sex and race oppression into one theoretical model parallels between the systems and experiences of domination for blacks and those for women, and as a result, it assumes that political mobilization against racism and sexism are comparable (King, 1988). In identifying the similarities between race and sex as determinants of oppression, Helen Hacker notes that women and non-whites hold similar positions in U.S. society. In addition to the physical attributes that identify women and people of color as differing from the white male social norm, Hacker notes that both groups also are assumed to possess personality traits (immaturity and emotionality) that lead to the justification of their subordinate economic, legal, educational, and social status (Hacker, 1951). Drawing the comparison between race and sex discrimination was an important tactical move on the part of early feminist

racial oppression were effective pedagogical tools for the theoretical conceptualization of and the political resistance to sexual inequality (King, 1988).

Their indoctrination into the U.S. racial hierarchy caused white women to bring a myopic vision of oppression to both waves of feminism. As evidenced by trends in the Women's Rights Movements of the early 1900s and the Women's Liberation Movement of the 1970s, issues of inequality were shaped by the consciousness of middle-class white women while the problems facing women of color and working-class women were virtually ignored (Davis, 1981). Ironically, despite the segregation of women of color from the mainstream struggle for suffrage,⁸ the first wave of the Women's Movement emerged from the fight for the abolition of slavery in the mid 1800s (Freeman, 1975; Hole & Levine, 1975; Davis, 1981). Middle class white women were losing economic importance in the home due to rapid mass industrialization and correspondingly experienced a decline in social status during this period. These women, considered to be upholders of morality,⁹ used their newfound leisure for involvement in the fight for abolition, which served the simultaneous purpose of maintaining the moral code and launching an implicit protest against what they

began to recognize as their own oppressive roles at home (Freeman, 1975).

With their exclusion from both membership in some organizations and public speaking, white women active in abolitionist causes realized that they were not viewed as political equals by their male counterparts and consequently recognized the need to resist their own oppression as women (Hole & Levine, 1975; Davis, 1981)¹⁰. Many women who spoke out about the ties between race and gender oppression, were silenced by the male abolitionists who feared that making women's rights an issue would dilute the struggle to end slavery (Davis, 1981).

After slavery was legally abolished (which can be partly attributed to the women's vigorous campaigning), the abolitionists turned their support to securing the rights, privileges, and immunities of *male* black citizens (Hole & Levine, 1975). When the women abolitionists campaigned to eliminate the word "male" from the 15th amendment, they met resistance from both the liberal wing of government and the male abolitionists who refused to cloud the struggle for black rights by including the rights of women (Hole & Levine, 1975). This defeat prompted the women abolitionists to form the Women's Rights Movement, with the primary focus of securing the right to vote.

While the origins of the U.S. Women's Movement lay in the struggle for the abolition of slavery, many key arguments asserted about the equality of blacks were neglected in the fight for women's suffrage. Through abolitionism, middle-class white women learned about the nature of human oppression and demonstrated a means to alleviate subjugation, which founding suffragists used in their struggle for the vote (Freeman, 1975). Unfortunately, the main motive of most of the women leading the movement was securing the vote for white women. Angela Davis, an activist and academic, comments on the exclusionary nature of the Women's Rights Movement: "In light of the organizers' abolitionist involvement, it would seem puzzling that slave women were entirely disregarded," (1981, p. 57) and additionally adds:

that a white woman associated with the anti-slavery movement could assume a racist posture toward a Black girl in the North reflected a major weakness in the abolitionist campaign--its failure to promote broad anti racist consciousness. This serious shortcoming and others, abundantly criticized [by some abolitionist women], was unfortunately carried over into the organized movement for women's rights (59).

While many former abolitionists involved in the Women's Movement recognized the inextricable link between race and gender oppression, the leadership's primary focus was on obtaining white women's vote (Hole & Levine, 1975). The

pervasive fear that suffrage for white women would never be realized if black men won the vote first fueled an ongoing struggle between suffragists and black leaders (Davis, 1981).¹¹

The Women's Liberation Movement

Like the first wave of the Women's Movement, the origins of the Women's Liberation Movement of the 1970s was in the struggle for equal rights of people of color in the Civil Rights Movement. Although factors such as the formation of the Commission on the Status of Women and the popularity of Betty Friedan's The Feminine Mystique played large roles in drawing white, middle class women into the second wave of the Women's Movement, the fight for equal rights emanated from a tumultuous period of social change (Doyle & Paludi, 1985). In a fashion closely resembling the awakening of women during the fight to abolish slavery, white women joined the struggle for the rights of people of color, only to realize they too were subjugated because of their gender. From this recognition grew a feminist ideology. Contemporary feminist theorists assert that women experience oppression resulting from a social structure based upon patriarchy (Overall, 1987). All social

institutions, legal, political, and economic, are ingrained with the patriarchal norms which give power and preference to men and are thus oppressive to women. In order to overcome the oppressive conditions of patriarchy, feminist theory promotes social change toward gender equity.

While feminists were intent upon fighting for women's equality, groups emerged with very divergent definitions of the priorities of and the means to securing equal rights.¹² The radical feminist perspective, for example viewed domination in human relationships as the basic evil in society and sought to dismantle the social system perpetuating oppression (Ware, 1981). Converging on some points with the radical feminists and varying on many others, socialist feminists saw equality as emerging only from a socialist revolution. The more mainstream faction -- liberal feminism-- was reformist and desired to work from within the system. The National Organization of Women (NOW) was born in the liberal feminist tradition, with the typical member being white, middle class, employed full time, and married. Because of their widely differing beliefs, early in their formation each feminist group was highly critical of the others; however, by the 1970s, the groups converged and the women's rights movement became more radical in its ideology (Boles, 1991). All three groups, in their separate

and conglomerate forms were severely criticized by black feminists for being racist, and the latter posed an alternative theory which incorporated race as part of feminist analysis (Sargent, 1981).¹³

While the Women's Liberation Movement organized to better the position of all women in the United States through the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment and other legal and legislative changes, implicit in these issues was a form of racism that gave priority to some struggles and neglected others, being blind and ignorant to the conditions of women of color (Joseph & Lewis, 1981).¹⁴ Many women in the movement for liberation, for example, publicly denounced motherhood and the family structure as oppressive, a stance that served to alienate many women of color. bell hooks explains the ethnocentric nature of this practice:

many black women find the family the least oppressive institution. Despite sexism in the context of family, we may experience dignity, self-worth, and a humanization that is not experienced in the outside world wherein we confront all forms of oppression...We wish to affirm the primacy of family life because we know that family ties are the only sustained support system for exploited and oppressed peoples. We wish to rid family life of the abusive dimensions created by sexist oppression without devaluing it (1984, p. 37).

As was the case in the struggle for suffrage, although awareness of the issues of oppression came from dealing with discrimination against people of color, once the movement for women's rights organized, the interests of non-whites

became secondary if not invisible (Ware, 1992). What resulted from the Women's Liberation Movement of the 1970s were victories on issues such as reproductive rights as well as equal employment and educational opportunities. These gains, however, were somewhat controversial because they primarily served women who already enjoyed the race and class privilege endemic to the capitalist economic structure of the United States (Joseph & Lewis, 1981).¹⁵ While the radical politics employed by many feminists during the 1970s called for the dismantling of the patriarchal social structure, others were content once they gained equal access to domains of white male privilege and left systematic oppression intact (hooks, 1994). The structure of both waves of the Women's Movement created a legacy of feminist separatism on the basis of race.

A Discussion of White Privilege

While many feminist issues are currently under discussion such as the continuing debates about reproductive rights and the chipping away at affirmative action policies, feminist reform is also present in academia. Much emphasis has been placed on including the voices of previously marginalized populations in the academic canon in order to

reformulate what constitutes knowledge (Weis & Fine, 1996). It must be recognized, however, that academia exists within a societal context and as such, is not immune to the problems inherent in the social structure. For example, significant differences exist in dialogues about race and gender in predominantly white and black classrooms taught by feminist college instructors, suggesting that race and gender cannot be treated as separate entities:

Like many white feminists, who are caught between a racial (and class) position of privilege and a gender position of oppression, we seem to have constructed this separation so as to avoid confronting our racial relations of privilege, while attempting to forge a connection with women of color around a common experience of gender oppression (Maher & Tetreault, 1991, p. 191).

The danger of allowing this separation to exist unchallenged is that whiteness is reinforced as a norm because it is not addressed as an issue and it silences non-white voices not in accordance with this viewpoint.

White academics must also be cautious of the tendency of false universalization. According to Marilyn Frye, white people speak in universals and white feminist writings are often limited by this false universalization that is accurate only about middle class white women and white men within white culture (Frye, 1991). The inclusion of women of color in feminist scholarship is crucial to challenging the anglocentric nature of academia and it is imperative

that the role of whiteness in creating and perpetuating the hierarchical structure of society also be explored. Racism is inherent in the fabric of the United States and white feminists, as members of this society, perpetuate racial inequality if they do not challenge the racial and gender status quo (Joseph & Lewis, 1981).

Feminists operate under a basic tenet that the patriarchal American social system affords men a measure of gender (male) privilege; however, the advantage that being white skinned gives white women has only recently been addressed in some feminist discourse (McIntosh, 1988). Because the nature of whiteness is like that of any dominant position where those benefiting from others' oppression are often unaware of their privilege, the advantage of being white is not customarily analyzed by whites (McIntosh, 1988; Frankenberg, 1993; hooks, 1995). Whites are allowed to be oblivious to their elevated status in the U.S. racial hierarchy because white privilege is kept strongly inculturated in the United States and serves to maintain the myth of meritocracy; those in power believe they deserve to be there and without question their power is subsequently reinforced (McIntosh, 1988). By ignoring the existence of whiteness, the advantage it provides whites, and the oppression it inflicts upon non-whites, this form of race

privilege is allowed to exist unchallenged (Nakayama & Krizek, 1996).

Because current feminist discourse places a strong emphasis on the inclusion of marginalized groups, it is especially important to discover how white feminists perceive their own race privilege in order to ensure that women of color are not purely symbolic additions to white feminism. Past research has shown that contemporary white feminist activists are generally unaware of their race privilege, which can result in a narrowly defined focus for the respective organizations that exclude issues important to women of color (Frankenberg, 1993; hooks, 1995). Feminist struggles must be redefined not only to include women of color in the largely white middle-class feminism practiced today, but also to examine how racism is perpetuated by white definitions and prioritizations of feminist ideology (Bhavnani & Coulson, 1986). In order to avoid re-creating the hierarchical nature of race stratification in feminist organizations, white privilege must be thoroughly scrutinized in order to undermine its pervasive nature as the American norm, the standard against which all else is measured (Weis & Fine, 1996).

While the examination of whiteness is relatively new, it is already being met with resistance from many whites,

who resent the emphasis on multiculturalism.¹⁶ In his study of whiteness in the university, sociologist Charles A. Gallagher finds, contrary to previous research stating that whiteness renders invisibility, that because white privilege has been named, white students are becoming distinctly aware of their racial identity. Rather than owning up to the relative privilege whiteness secures, a majority of white students, however, view whiteness as a liability, arguing that "we live in a meritocracy where nonwhites have every advantage whites do and, in some cases, more opportunity because of affirmative action" (Gallagher, 1995, p. 176). Furthermore, because many white students believe social equality and equal opportunity are thriving in the United States, "white" is presented as another racial group that is struggling over political and cultural resources, which effectively removes the privilege of being white skinned from this viewpoint. Many researchers note that examining whiteness causes discomfort that may be enacted in the type of defensive viewpoint found in Gallagher's study, but that all individuals must examine their own role in the perpetuation of racism:

In a certain way it is true that being white-skinned means that everything I do will be wrong--at the least an exercise of unwarranted privilege--and I will encounter the reasonable anger of women of color at every turn...There is a correct line on the matter of white racism which is, in fact, quite correct, to the

effect that as a white person one must never claim not be racist, but only to be anti-racist. The reasoning is that racism is so systematic and white privilege is so impossible to escape, that one is, simply, trapped (Frye, 1991, p. 126).

This is not to suggest that white people are victims of privilege, rather, given that racism is embedded in the U.S. social structure, it is impossible not to have internalized some of its tenets. The only way to oppose racism on a systematic level is to engage in "anti-racist" work that seeks to expose and dismantle racial privilege.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Due to a high degree of frustration and guilt, discussions about race relations are potentially volatile. Most enlightened whites fear being considered racist, and thus are generally conscious of how they are perceived when discussing issues of race. In order to alleviate any potential discomfort for the narrators while drawing out sincere and spontaneous attitudes, data were collected via a semi-structured, open-ended conversational interview format. This forum allows for discussion and clarification of responses in a way that structured survey questions do not. According to many feminist scholars, the interview situation also allows a measure of flexibility with the data collection process that can serve to moderate the hierarchical researcher/subject relationship that may be present in other forms of research (Oakley, 1988; Reinharz, 1992).

The respondents in this study are white women who reside or work in the Santa Clara Valley and are involved in feminist activist organizations that serve the needs of women. Because it is difficult to determine people's organic racial identity, all volunteers for this study were

asked to classify their racial identity on a questionnaire. Participants included in the study were chosen on the basis of their self-identification as a white woman and a feminist. Because such women do not form a large portion of the population, the data were collected using purposive snowball sampling to solicit interviews from college women's centers and organizations, political organizations such as the National Organization of Women (NOW) and the Women's International League of Peace and Freedom (WILPF), and health or victim services such as Planned Parenthood, YWCA, and other community groups. A total of 22 women were interviewed for this study; however, two interviews were discarded due to faulty equipment and poor interviewing conditions.

This study employs Frankenberg's theory (1993) that individuals who are white-skinned lack an awareness of how whiteness affects their social position and privilege. Because whiteness is considered to be a normative identity in U.S. society, being white-skinned affords the privilege of ignoring race as an attribute that impacts their daily existence. Frankenberg found this trend to be true for women involved in various forms of activism, but she did not focus on feminist activism in particular.

Examining the relationship between feminist activism and attitudes about racial privilege is important as one of the goals of contemporary feminism is the eradication of all forms of oppression. Women involved in activism that recognizes and caters to the needs of women, then, are expected to exhibit an understanding of the effects of race privilege. How the types of activist organizations affects perceptions of race privilege also has not been explored to date.

The specific hypothesis guiding this study is that white women involved in feminist organizations are aware that race is an oppressive force in U.S. society, but lack the cognizance of how their own race affords them privilege and shapes their identity and interests as feminists.¹⁷ For the purposes of this study, white racial identity is defined as a person of European ancestry who classifies herself as white. A demographic data sheet was completed by each participant at the beginning of the interview asking for her ethnic identification in order to ensure (beyond a cursory judgment of physical appearance) that she is part of the targeted population. Only women who identify themselves as white are included in this sample because bi-racial women and women of color are expected to have a higher degree of

awareness of white privilege due to their categorization as an "other" in the United States.

Participation in a feminist activist organization is defined by recent (within the last six months) or current involvement in a formally organized collective of individuals working to pursue gains in the status of women, either in the area of reproductive health, student services, victim services (domestic violence and rape issues) or political issues.

Although demographic factors used as possible explanatory variables of the stated relationships are the length of activist involvement and age. The narrators range

TABLE 1: AGE OF PARTICIPANTS

AGE	TOTAL IN SAMPLE	PERCENT OF SAMPLE
18-24	4	20%
25-32	5	25%
33-40	1	5%
41-48	6	30%
49-56	3	15%
57+	1	5%

in age from 21 to 67 (please refer to Table 1 on page 29 for the age breakdown) with the highest percentage in the 41-48 age bracket. Four of the sample identify themselves as bisexual and the remaining 16 classify their sexual orientation as heterosexual (please see Table 2, page 30).¹⁸ All of the women are college educated; three have advanced degrees.¹⁹ The income levels and occupations of the narrators varies widely with some women being full time students, some of whom are mothers and others employed full time in fields ranging from high tech positions to social services. Eight of the narrators are married and twelve are single; three identify themselves as divorced (see Table 3, page 31 for additional details).

All interviews were conducted in a face to face format in either a residence, private office setting, or public space, as determined by the wishes of the narrator, and were audiotaped with each woman's permission. In order to

TABLE 2: MARITAL STATUS

MARITAL STATUS	TOTAL IN SAMPLE	PERCENT
MARRIED	11	55%
SINGLE	9	45%

collect somewhat uniform, comparable data, each interview was guided by the same set of questions, however, because of the purposely conversational tone of the interviews, each varied in content and length.

Inquiry into the narrator's perception about the intersection of sexism and racism were included in order to assess how each woman views her own positioning in the system of structural oppression in the U.S. (See Appendix 1). Additionally, a series of questions addressing the contemporary state of race relations and the narrator's views about the nature of racism were discussed (See Appendix 1).

White privilege is characterized as the tendency, in a society where white-skinned people hold the positions of greatest power, to provide white people with advantages at the expense of non-whites. Because people of color are accordingly not part of the norm, their exclusion creates a

TABLE 3: SEXUAL ORIENTATION

SEXUAL ORIENTATION	TOTAL IN SAMPLE	PERCENT
HETEROSEXUAL	16	80%
BISEXUAL	4	20%

privileged position for whites in all areas of society. The awareness of white privilege and how whiteness affects the participant's life were addressed by questions about topics ranging from affirmative action trends to anti-immigrant sentiments. Furthermore, each participant was asked specific questions about her belief in the existence of white privilege and its impact both on society in general and on her own life.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Various trends emerge in the way the subgroups of participants view and understand feminism, race, and white privilege. Because attitudes seem to be consistently aligned according to specific characteristics of the women interviewed, two groups are established here with the purpose of providing a clear basis of analysis. Interviewees are categorized into the two groups according to their responses to questions about the nature of sexism, racism, and white privilege. While the entire content of the interviews supply the basis for classifying the participants' groupings, the responses to the following specific questions are the best indicators:

"What are your greatest concerns regarding the contemporary status of women?"

"Do you see the issues of race and gender as being connected?"

"What do you feel are some of the root causes of racism?"

"How do you explain the recent propositions passed in California (187 & 209) that limit resources and opportunities to immigrants and people of color?"

"Have you ever thought about your identity as a white woman?"

"How do you think that being white has affected your life?"

The responses to each of these questions is carefully analyzed according to how each participant views the nature of racism and sexism, and in turn, how they perceive their own identity as a white woman.

One group, hereafter referred to as "liberal feminists," is comprised of women who are either neophyte feminists or employ what may be considered the traditionally liberal feminist views of reform within the existing system. The responses that classify the narrators as liberal feminists are those identifying sexism as the primary basis of oppression in U.S. and expressing ambivalence about the pervasive nature of racism. One participant, for example, was classified as a liberal feminist partially because of her attitudes about racism:

What do you think are the root causes of racism?

I guess it's a fear of something that is different. And it's those white males thinking that things are at their disposal. If you look back at slavery...I think it is a fear of something different, a fear of change, people not having open minds.-Pam, age 24

Donna, another liberal feminist, expressed her ideas about the nature of sexism:

It doesn't matter which race you are, as a woman, you are always on the bottom.

Additionally, participants who lack or have a limited understanding of whiteness and its effects are also classified as liberal feminists. Many of the participants that fall into this classification have considered themselves feminists for fewer than five years and tend to be younger than 30. Also included in this category are women involved in partisan political activism, specifically with the Democratic party, and those whose primary activism is involvement in NOW. The group of twelve liberal feminists tend to view discrimination along gender lines as the most fundamental form of oppression.

The second group of narrators is termed "anti-racist feminists." Participants are classified as anti-racist because they report that racism and sexism are two forms of oppression that serve to preserve the status quo in terms of economic and social power. One anti-racist narrator, for example, comments on the nature of oppression:

I think [racism] is the issue of other, I really do. I think it is a power over situation...I'm convinced in my heart that sexism and racism have the same root.-Tara, age 44

The participants categorized as anti-racist also understand that whiteness is a means of perpetuating the oppression on people of color and express a commitment to reversing these effects.

Eight of the interviewees are categorized as anti-racist feminists, while the other twelve are considered to be liberal feminists. [Two of the twenty are difficult to categorize because they are anti-racist in most respects, but differ from the others in this grouping on several key concepts.] In contrast to the liberal feminists, anti-racist feminists are generally over the age of 35 and have extensive involvement (over ten years) in feminist activism. What clearly delineates the anti-racist feminists from the liberal feminists is their current or past involvement in activist groups that work to change the current social structure. Lucy, for example, is classified as an anti-racist due to her understanding of oppression:

I know there is an awareness that some of [oppression] has to do with the structure...I see some of it as being the patriarchal structure. I don't mean male dominated, [I mean] the idea of hierarchical structure.

Many of the participants classified as anti-racists were actively involved in the Civil Rights and Women's Liberation Movements and view economic issues in addition to race and gender discrimination, as elements of oppression.²⁰

Several factors complicate the designation of women into one category or the other. Bisexual orientation seems to classify younger women into the anti-racist category despite their anomalous status on age and activism lines because their attitudes are more congruent with this

grouping of narrators, which is possibly caused by the experience of oppression due to sexual orientation.

The Connection Between Feminism and Race

In examining the various aspects of feminism, the ways in which liberal and anti-racist feminists view the nature of racism vary significantly. Liberal feminists, for example, tend to view racism as an individual rather than structural problem. As such, the liberal feminists do not view racism as significant a problem as sexism. Responding to the question "what do you feel are some of the root causes of racism?" many liberal feminists cite fear and ignorance, intimating that this problem can be solved by changing people's consciousness. Some of the comments from the liberal feminists include:

*I think a huge cause is people teaching [racism] to their kids and then their kids...it is a cycle.
Ignorance and underexposure to race—Rebecca, age 22*

Misunderstanding and misinformation. I think a lot of it is that people don't have a clue what else is out there, what the other cultures are all about—Sarah, age 45

I think there is some fear of what is different. Humans seem to have this pathology that they need to feel superior to someone. Men need to feel superior to women. I think it is the need to blame somebody else, to have an enemy to hate.—Amanda, age 38

By asserting that racism is an individual problem, these analyses lack an examination of the structural factors that enact racism on a societal level. The liberal feminists identify racism as a problem that lies within individuals. Interestingly, these same women recognize sexism as a social problem that needs to be combated on a structural level. This is consistent with the views of most women in the liberal feminist grouping who consider discrimination on the basis of gender to be the basic form of structural oppression. Many of the liberal feminists additionally claim no interaction with people who have acted in ways they consider racist and additionally report that they have observed absolutely no evidence of any racism in any of the feminist organizations in which they have participated.²¹ This seems to indicate that either the liberal feminists associate with a rare collective of enlightened individuals, or more likely, that they recognize racism only in extreme and overt forms.

While anti-racist feminists acknowledge that racism can be problematic on an individual level, they are more concerned with combating it on the structural level.

One thing that keeps racism going is the economic benefit of the ruling class. To have people who are forced to work for lower wages keeps everybody's wages down, keeps the whole working class in line, so racism is kind of a handy political tool for keeping the population divided.-Sally, age 54

*To me, [racism] is economics, control. I think that is the basis...I'm not trying not to acknowledge that that it is cultural. It is, but it has become cultural mainly because the economic situation has allowed it.-
Mary, age 67*

Because the anti-racist feminists recognize that racism is structural, they understand that fighting it entails more than changing individual attitudes. In order to deconstruct oppression, anti-racist feminists acknowledge that fundamental aspects of U.S. society must be changed, ranging from economic to political structures.

Each group's perspective of the nature of racism is an important indicator of how they in turn comprehend the effect of being white skinned in a society where whiteness is the valued norm. One way liberal feminists differ from anti-racist feminists is in their perception of U.S. politics. Half of the women in the liberal feminist category, generally those involved in partisan politics or those under age 24, see the election of women into the current political system as a sign of progress. Some believe that working within the existing system will provide additional opportunities for and improve the status of women. It should be noted that the politicians cited by the liberal feminists as potentially improving the status of women, however, are all white women from privileged backgrounds.²² Aside from one woman's editorial about how

Jesse Jackson may perpetuate the racial divide in politics, none of the narrators who believe positive change for women will come about through interaction with the existing political system address how people of color may similarly benefit. When the liberal feminists speak of progress in the current political system for women, they tend to generalize the situation to white women as few seem able to address how both women and people of color, or the intersecting population can benefit simultaneously. The norm of whiteness is thus reinforced by the liberal feminists in this instance.

In contrast, the majority of anti-racist feminists believe that because the political system exists within a racist society and is controlled by the most privileged social class in the United States, the political system serves to perpetuate and support racism.

I believe that the government is manipulating us in a way that will keep up powerless...You can't help having the tendency to this if you are hearing it all the time. At least in terms of this country, I think we are prepared and bred to be racist, and to not be, I think we have to fight it all the time.-Shelby, age 29

Many of the anti-racist feminists have extensive background in socialist politics and view the capitalist economic structure of the United States as a major source of oppression across race, gender and, especially, class lines. Regardless of their political orientation, however, the

anti-racist feminists share a common view of racism as intertwined with sexism and other means of subjugation (classism, heterosexism, ageism) that keeps power from the hands of marginalized people. Because many of the anti-racist feminists concede that inequality is endemic to a capitalist economic structure, they view the U.S. political system as an agent that reinforces and preserves the oppression of marginalized populations. Approaching inequality as a systemic feature that affects any who are marginalized by race, sex, and/or class makes the anti-racist stance more inclusive.

Racism, sexism, and classism are three things that have divided up the left and caused it to lose a lot of power...There was racism that has happened historically all along that still hasn't been acknowledged enough, so we are still in the process of deconstructing all of that. When we talk to each other, we have to talk about that intersection I think, too, because you can't just separate that out and talk about race.-Daisy, age 49

Whether in an analysis of politics or the economic system, the anti-racist feminists recognize that unless all marginalized groups participate as equals in the struggle to eradicate inequality, little progress can be made.

In a similar analysis, the liberal feminists who view racism as an individual rather than structural problem have a greater tendency to assess recent propositions passed in California that limit resources for immigrants and dismantle

affirmative action policies as mean spirited, fearful, or ignorant.²³ However, anti-racist feminists (and some liberal feminists) see that the passage of these amendments reflects only the views of the voting public, not all Californians, as voting rates reflect less than one-third of the eligible population. As Lucy, one anti-racist feminist points out:

Whites register more. Whites vote more. The whole voting system...we have something to gain from the way society is, therefore, as a white person, it is worth my effort to vote on issues because I have more to gain. I am in control...I speak English, I speak and read it well. I am an upper class white and it is my white language that it is being written in and it is my white language that it is being debated in.

Generally, those feminists who understand the structural nature of racism express similar understandings of the way that the political system serves to reinforce the advantage of being white skinned. The benefactors of white privilege are encouraged to support and participate in a system that consistently promotes their interests as members of the status quo.

Examining White Privilege

Like their views of race in the political system, the liberal and anti-racist participants also have differing

perceptions of how whiteness impacts both the larger white society and their own lives. All participants, except for two, acknowledge that in the United States, privileges exist simply from being white skinned. The ability to name white privilege, however, does not *a priori* equal an understanding of how the existence of white privilege oppresses people of color. Because white privilege emerges from a society that values whiteness above all other racial identities, it, too, is embedded in the social structure as well as in individual attitudes. Therefore, without acknowledging that racial oppression is structural, it is difficult to analyze the impact of white privilege on the daily lives of white skinned people in the United States.

Many of the liberal feminist participants admit their whiteness affords them some advantages; however, they are unable to identify concrete ways in which they are personally affected. Liberal feminists, for example, often notice whiteness only in contrast to the position of other non-whites:

It happens when I see somebody else. It happens when a guy goes to the mall and the security guy shoots him in the back because they are sure that he shoplifted something when it was because he was African American. When things like that happen, that is when it hits me. That wouldn't happen to me.—Kris, age 24

The majority of liberal feminists understand that being white gives them spatial privilege; as whites, they have a measure of freedom to move about without being aware of their race²⁴. This recognition emerges only in contrast to the lack of spatial privilege of people of color, and not from an independent consciousness of their whiteness.

It has been pointed out to me that we have advantages and privileges simply because we are born white. I never consciously thought about it until recently when the incident happened with the Afro-American boy [accused her of discriminatory employment practices]...That was something that kind of surprised me. It was not something that I consciously knew before. I just thought that I got away with stuff because I had a big smile and blue eyes. The white part never occurred to me.—Donna, age 52

When white privilege is brought into the liberal feminist consciousness, it challenges many women's self perceptions as progressive thinkers in pursuit of equality. Many liberal feminists recognize that white privilege provides them with unwarranted advantages and are uncomfortable discussing the ramifications of similar privilege.

This is not something that I am comfortable about. It is not something that I want to cash in on by any means. Just statistically, I know that [whiteness] has to have [given me advantages]. I don't really notice it in terms of myself, but I am a white female, college educated. I know I have got it pretty well off. I don't like to cash in on it. I don't like to think about where that places me, but I know that is who I am.—Katie, age 21

While most of liberal feminists recognize white privilege, they are unable to admit any overwhelming influence of this privilege on their lives. In discussing the advantages of whiteness, many liberal feminists subvert the course of their narratives and assert that as women, they continue to suffer from gender oppression, perhaps in an attempt to minimize their race privilege.

Gender is the most basic and pervasive discrimination, even worse than race. Race is pretty bad, but I think the basic, fundamental outlook is that women are inferior.—Kathy, 43

In addition to emphasizing discrimination on gender lines as a counter to racial inequality, some participants attribute marginalization to entirely different factors:

I think that no matter who you are, where you grow up makes a difference...I think you have to look at different things. Like some people let their teeth get all cruddy. They may be white but they are not receiving special things, but that is because they have let themselves go...So I think it depends. You look at each individual thing.—Sylvia, age 44

While this narrator may be pointing out class as a factor contributing to discrimination, she does so when asked a pointed question of whether she feels being white-skinned results in any type of privilege. The sentiment that class is a determinant factor in the relative privilege of whiteness in the United States is correct; however, it seems the issue arises only from an attempt to avoid the topic of

white privilege.

Anti-racist feminists compare their unearned white privilege to that of male privilege, as both serve to marginalize those occupying the status of "other." Unlike liberal feminists, anti-racist feminists acknowledge that white privilege serves as a tool in the deconstruction across race, gender, and class lines.²⁵

Two things hit home. It wasn't just the consciousness of being white, it was the awareness that racism is not a personal perspective. Basically, it is a social problem. It wasn't how I saw minorities, it was how my society...I am a white person. It is my society. It is how we as a group have allowed ourselves privilege. In other words, it is not what I have done to somebody, it is that I take advantage of every privilege I can get, whether I know it or not.-Lucy, age 46

Because the racism that allows white privilege is inherent in all social institutions, anti-racist feminists note that whiteness can only be erased as the norm by changing the U.S. social structure. In order to motivate this change, anti-racist feminists realize they must form alliances with all marginalized people and work toward the common cause of universal economic and social justice. Only by actively recognizing white privilege, realizing how it allows them countless advantages in U.S. society, and refusing to be complicit in that privilege, can white feminists begin to forge the alliances necessary to

combat subjugation on all societal levels:

The whole thing about having privilege...if you say that you want to organize with people and you want social change, the number one thing you have to do is get off your privilege.-Daisy, 49

Whiteness and Activism

Indicative of the differing ideologies between the anti-racist and liberal feminists is the way each approaches the recruitment of women of color to their mainly white organizations. Both the liberal and anti-racist feminists express a pressing need to include women of color in their activist groups, with each woman proposing a unique means to expanding the perspective of their respective organizations. Each group of feminists has a different understanding of their own role in perpetuating the racist consciousness of U.S. society, implying that the two groups also differ in their approach of incorporating the interests of women of color into their organizations. Because liberal feminists view racism as a primarily individual outlook, they tend to neglect how their own racial biases may prohibit the involvement of women of color in their activist groups. Many of the women in one primarily white, multi-issue collective, for example, claim that one primary foci of the organization is increasing the racial diversity of the

members. Most of the liberal feminists, however, are unable to explain why their organizations remain overwhelmingly white:

[Our group] really wants to be a multicultural organization, but I think part of the problem is that each group of women is pursuing its own power base and so it is hard to then come together and be part of someone else's. We look to be multicultural, but black women's groups don't look to be multicultural; they are black women's groups. Hispanic women's groups don't look to be multicultural. I don't know what the solution to that is.-Donna, age 52

Noting that women of color do not want to be part of what this narrator considers a white women's group indicates how many liberal feminists view the inclusion of multicultural voices as simply having people of color present in their already existing organizations. Instead of understanding why women of color may need to self-segregate in order to build solidarity on issues that are specific to their twice-marginalized social status, this participant minimizes the importance of this alliance, effectively dismissing the women of color who do not share her organization's definition of empowerment.

While a few of the participants perceive that the priorities of women of color are different from both their own and those of their organization, the majority remain unable to explain why both groups of women are not working collaboratively if both supposedly have similar goals.

Other liberal feminists note that they want to include women of color, but have no means of interaction by which to discover common issues.

I have no understanding of how to approach a different culture and trying to learn what the culture is all about...Also, I have no way of knowing what questions I should be asking to understand or what questions are culturally inappropriate to ask or what topics are culturally inappropriate to ask.-Sarah, age 45

This narrator expresses a sincere desire to connect with women of color on issues that are of mutual importance but she does not know how to instigate communication. Sarah's perceived isolation from other racial groups is especially astonishing given that she lives in an area where over 50 percent of the population is comprised of people of color. The fact that many liberal feminists can choose to recognize racial issues illustrates their racial privilege: only when white women consciously decide to address race does it become an issue.

In contrast, many predominantly white anti-racist feminist groups note the complexities of recruiting women of color and making them feel empowered within their organizations.

I guess part of it is really not involving people in the decision making process. It is more like 'we do this, why don't you join us,' rather than 'we are trying to solve this problem, will you help us try to do that?'-Mary, age 67

I've also seen organizations that actually deal with issues of race and racial equality who don't get it in either sense that they don't understand developing leadership and...they remain almost all white in spite of the fact that they deal with these issues. It has to do with not allowing other sectors to grow and flourish.—Marge, age 46

These anti-racist feminists seem to recognize that the same factors that reinforce whiteness as an advantage in society may also be present in organizations that struggle against injustice if the members do not constantly challenge the white privilege they bring to their interactions. Anti-racist feminists thus recognize a critical paradox: when white women recruit women of color to their organizations and do not solicit their assistance in restructuring the organization to include their specific concerns, then the inclusion of women of color is only symbolic. In these instances, white women are guilty of assuming a dominant position over women of color:

If one group is really not empowered, then we are not operating on a real equal basis. Before you can participate on an equal basis, both groups have to be equal or else one group will be dominated. It is the same thing for women who are in structures that are dominated by white men.—Mary, age 67

Rather than continuing in yet another relationship based on inequality, women of color often will leave these organizations, finding support in groups where race is not a subversive (and even threatening) factor.

I have seen that you will either do what the white women will accept as an agenda or they will leave and it becomes almost exclusively racial or ethnic...I haven't seen the issue resolved.-Lucy, age 46

Thus, the anti-racist feminists note that little progress toward an equal multicultural alliance is possible until white women are willing to check their white privilege at the door in feminist organizations and work with women of color to promote a mutually beneficial structure and mission of the group.

Confronting Internalized Racism

In addition to acknowledging their racial advantage, anti-racist feminists also admit that they have internalized the racism that permeates all social institutions. By being socialized in a society they consider to be institutionally racist, the anti-racist feminists understand that they must continually scrutinize their own views for unchecked biases:

I am very disturbed when I hear anyone say 'I am white, but I am not a racist.' I always come back and say 'you have to be.' How can you not be? If you don't even see the paradigm, then you are very much a racist.-Lucy, age 46

Having internalized racism disturbs anti-racist feminists, who constantly fight to eradicate oppression on both the individual and structural levels. The anti-racist feminists

understand how the structural components of racism shape and influence even the most progressive attitudes:

We have to keep working on bettering ourselves and we have to keep reevaluating and checking-in. I notice times when I have a gut reaction that I think is probably racist and I have to admit it to myself and I have to try to work it out. So, to me, that is what feminism should be about for everybody.—Shelby, age 29

Acknowledging their biases and privileges equips the anti-racist feminists with the tools to deal with the issues of race that arise through their interactions with women of color.

Liberal feminists seem to have more difficulties admitting that they have internalized racist ideology as a result of their socialization in the United States. The comments of a majority of liberal feminists indicate a willingness to observe racism only in conjunction with others biases and not their own. Donna, the liberal feminist who was accused of racially discriminatory employment practices, fails to see that she holds any racial biases:

I support three girls to go to school in Kenya. I've been a member of NAACP and ACLU and given money to the United Negro College Fund...So you can have the best intention in the world, but someone, from their perspective, can decide you are racist. I have heard some black people say that all white people are racist, no matter what, which doesn't give you much hope.

The fact that Donna is in a position to be able to support people of color illuminates her privilege within a hierarchical system. While Donna apparently supports many groups benefiting people of color, she does not recognize that she has likely internalized at least some measure of the racist ideology that permeates the U.S. social fabric. What may additionally cloud the issue of internalized racism is the way that liberal feminists define racism. Because they tend to view racism as an individual overt action, liberal feminists are unable to identify these elements in their own behaviors and thus do not perceive themselves as having such biases.

Perceptions of Whiteness

As stated earlier, the majority of all feminists reflected in this research admit that being white skinned affords them privilege as a member of society. What being white-skinned means to these women as feminists and activists is at times congruent, but is also wholly dependent on her orientation as a liberal or anti-racist feminist. With the recent support of multiculturalism in academia, politics, and the media, it is no surprise that all of the feminists express a deep, sincere appreciation for other cultures. Women from both the liberal and anti-

racist groups express envy of other cultures that are rich in a tradition that they feel is lacking in their own identification as a "regular old, white American." Despite one's status as a liberal or anti-racist feminist, there is an overall tendency to exoticize people of color and their respective cultural practices; the narrators as a group seem to reify all other positions as above white. Maintaining this view embodies a false sense of appreciation, however, because the white feminists import their own meanings onto the cultural elements from a standpoint of whiteness, which thus serves to fetishize the idealized elements of the "other." Only one anti-racist feminist sees this tendency as problematic:

So many whites just say, 'I don't really have a culture. I mean what is mine, Wonderbread? Kraft Macaroni and Cheese?' You know, they go to the foods, but they don't necessarily see. And it's that totally Eurocentric attitude of 'we are,' everything else that's different is a culture, and not even recognizing that our way of life is its own culture.—Stacie, age 32²⁵

While the appreciation of "other" does appear to be genuine, the origins of this consciousness lie in whiteness being the norm. Exoticizing divergent traditions serves to reinforce whiteness as the cultural standard; the value placed on other cultures by white feminists emanates from a viewpoint

where being white skinned is internalized as an unnamed and unquestioned social norm.

Whiteness as a Liability

The most marked way in which the liberal and anti-racist feminist views differ is in the perception of whiteness as a liability. All anti-racist feminist narrators understand that being white skinned brings them social privilege, many of the liberal feminists, however, note that in several situations, whiteness has been a disadvantage.

I know that I have made comments before that if I was black, I would have gone to Harvard on a scholarship. I have thought about being a little disadvantaged, but it doesn't matter...but I guess maybe the fact that I am making statements like that is telling of something. Maybe I do feel disadvantaged being white and that is why so many people are against affirmative action because they feel it is like a disadvantage.--Rebecca, age 22

Like schooling, employment represents another situation in which liberal feminists view their whiteness as a disadvantage. Because many of liberal feminists aspire to careers that employ their feminist politics (in fields such as social services and advocacy), they report that their whiteness has kept them from securing desired positions. Many liberal feminists experience frustration--and even

anger--about their inability to secure coveted positions due to a multicultural requirement, even while they understand intellectually that diversifying the workplace by hiring women of color is an important focus for social service jobs. These statements discount the fact that, as white women, liberal feminists are more likely to have benefited from white privilege in ways that will aid them in finding employment, ways unavailable to women of color.

Acknowledging whiteness as both a privilege and a liability creates a critical paradox for liberal feminists. Because whiteness is identified as the privileged position and norm, liberal feminists may experience discomfort at having internalized beliefs that they perceive are incongruent with a multicultural society.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Within the two groups of feminist activists are ideological lines that seemingly split the community. While the views that separate feminists need not be divisive, careful examination of the divergent issues and approaches is necessary in order to work toward the common goals of social justice. However, liberal and anti-racist feminists agree on at least one key point: both have the fundamental grounding in feminism that motivates them to employ activism as a means to challenging the position of women in the United States. But, because of their views of the nature of racism, liberal and anti-racist feminists perceive the role of white privilege and their responsibility for its eradication via their activism very differently.

Perhaps the most incongruent perception between liberal and anti-racist feminists is in examining the nature of racism. Liberal feminists see racism as a problem stemming from individual attitudes. In discussing the nature of white privilege, however, while many liberal feminists readily admit that their whiteness brings them unwarranted benefits, they describe the origins of white privilege only as being larger than any individual attitudes. The liberal

feminists' awareness of racism and white privilege does not go beyond naming each in its most basic form, indicating that they do not understand that white privilege is a function of racism. Viewing racism as a problem best remedied by changing individual attitudes is a crucial way for liberal feminists to maintain an ideological consistency which absolves them from eradicating white privilege. Because racism is an individual problem and they do not self-identify as racist, liberal feminists allow themselves to view racism as a problem best dealt with by changing other people's attitudes, ignoring their own role in perpetuating racism via their blind acceptance of white privilege. The very admission that whiteness provides privilege causes extreme discomfort for the liberal feminists precisely because of the inconsistency between these views: how can racism be individual if white privilege is not? Through their inability to connect racism and white privilege, the liberal feminists demonstrate that they lack a deep understanding of either concept. Though ostensibly progressive thinkers, the liberal feminists do not recognize that the same system that creates racism also creates privilege since the structural dynamic of both structures is identical.

Anti-racist feminists, however, recognize the systemic nature of all forms of inequality and engage in activism that challenges multiple kinds of oppression. Unlike liberal feminists, there is less internal ideological struggle in the anti-racist feminist group since they understand that these dynamics are consistent. Anti-racist feminists are able to identify whiteness as a legitimate location that provides advantages and shapes identities via the internalized norms of the social system because they realize that racism is a structural rather than individual social factor. Further, because they see all forms of inequality as systemic, anti-racist feminists recognize that the current social structure is the root of disparity on all levels. With this understanding, the anti-racist feminists thus accept personal responsibility in challenging the system to eradicate privilege.

Unquestionably, both the liberal and anti-racist feminists are committed to combating issues of inequality. Each person who is dedicated to reaching this end, however, must question how her own privilege clouds how she recruits, accepts, and interacts with women of color. That liberal feminists express an interest in welcoming women of color into their activism is a crucial first step in crossing the racial divide. Anti-racist feminists, however, recognize

that simply assimilating women of color into their brand of feminism does not combat racial oppression but may, in fact, serve to reinforce a pattern of white dominance. With their greater understanding of racial privilege, anti-racist feminists realize the need to continue questioning both the subtle and overt ways that they, as white women, are the benefactors of others' oppression. The anti-racist feminists, however, must continually caution themselves against becoming complacent. An awareness of privilege alone does not provide the means to dismantling it. On a continual basis, those who practice feminism need to work to dismantle oppression on all levels because when a social relationship of dominance is allowed to exist unchallenged, one group will continue to be the benefactor and the other the oppressed.

Although not discussed here, class oppression is another crucial element of whiteness to be explored. This research omits a class analysis in order to focus on the relationship between race and gender. Because systems of oppression are inseparable, however, additional future research needs to include, if not primarily focus upon, how class affects attitudes about whiteness. Many of the anti-racist women, in fact, comment that they feel class oppression to be more significant than that of either race

or gender, uniquely classifying their understanding of white privilege. Analyzing the intersection of class with whiteness is another important step in identifying and dismantling the degrees of privilege resulting from multiple levels of oppression.

NOTES

¹The names of the women quoted are pseudonyms. Additionally, the listed ages are approximations based on the narrators' indication of their age according to the given categories: 18-24, 25-32, 33-40, 41-48, 49-56, and 57+.

²In this context, whites are classified as those who can pass as white skinned in American society. Because America's social structure is, in the words of bell hooks, "white supremacist" (meaning that whiteness is valued and rewarded as the norm) classification on the basis of appearance is sufficient to suggest that an individual perceived societally as white may reap the advantages of that appearance regardless of her actual racial identity.

³The women studied here are primarily of upper-middle to middle class, with a few exceptions. Although class issues are also important to examine, they are not dealt with in this research.

⁴DuBois' work names the otherness of blacks in The Souls of Black Folk (1895), but in doing so, does not expose or name whiteness:

"...the Negro is sort of a seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second sight in this American world—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (3).

⁵This researcher acknowledges that appearing white-skinned does not always equate being of Caucasian background since individuals from many racial groups can appear to be white. In this context, appearing white-skinned is used to denote a Caucasian-like features.

⁶While the use of the terms "white" and "non-white" may be perceived as reasserting whiteness as a norm and non-whiteness as an other, it is not the intention of this researcher to validate any such dichotomy. These terms

serve the purpose of this study, which focuses on the attitudes of white women. Because there is no existing term which avoids marginalizing any racially oppressed group in comparison to the group studied here, "white" and "non-white" will be used as periodic descriptors. The problematic nature of this terminology is duly noted.

⁷Some biologists assert that racial distinctions can be scientifically made on the basis of phenotypes, which are human features that signify membership to a specific racial group.

⁸Women of color were involved in the struggle for suffrage, however, their participation is rarely documented in the accounts of white women. Angela Davis discusses women of color's historic exclusion from the Suffrage Movement in Women, Race, and Class (1981).

⁹This was an era in which women were judged according to the cult of true womanhood. Motherhood was the ultimate role for white women of middle and upper classes, and this identity transcended their familial life, extending their moral responsibilities to the public realm. Working class women were excluded from this "cult" as they sought employment in factories per economic necessity (Segrest, 1996.)

¹⁰As white abolitionists demanded leadership, a rift between white and black abolitionists occurred. Consistent with the dominant ideology, blacks were either relegated to an underling position in the movement, or they joined factions of the abolitionist movement with black leadership (Segrest, 1996).

¹¹The fear that black men would win the vote before white women and thus prevent women's suffrage can be characterized as monism, which is defined in Liberating Theory by Michael Albert as "a political claim that one particular domination precipitates all really important oppressions. Whether Marxist, anarchist, nationalist, or feminist, these 'ideal types' argue that important social relations can all be reduced to the economy, state, culture, or gender" (Albert, 1986, p. 6).

¹²See Ware (1970) and Sargent (1981) for in-depth discussions of the formation and composition of each faction of the women's movement.

¹³ It should also be noted that these groups were also criticized by lesbian women for having maintaining heterosexist ideologies, although the radical feminist faction did address and support issues pertinent to lesbians.

¹⁴ The Women's Liberation Movement of the 1970's has also been criticized for its insensitivity to class issues.

¹⁵ This criticism is meant not to discount the great strides made by the Women's Liberation Movement, but to look critically at the asserted priorities and goals.

¹⁶ Students are not alone in resisting the examination of whiteness. In mid-1997, a conference at the University of California at Berkeley about the social construction of whiteness was highly criticized by the local media for being "anti-white."

¹⁷ At the onset of this study, strength of feminist affiliation was also being considered as an important relationship to examine. As the interviewing process took place, it became clear that the type and length of feminist involvement was a more meaningful indicator of orientation.

¹⁸ This researcher recognizes that the sample is somewhat biased because no women identifying their sexuality as lesbian are included in the study. Attempts were made to recruit lesbian women to this study by soliciting volunteers at organization that serve gay and lesbian populations to no avail.

¹⁹ It is acknowledged that because the entire population of this study is college educated or currently working toward a degree, this research has a measure of class bias. Do note, however, that at least two of the participants indicate that they are welfare recipients.

²⁰ Noting that younger women are generally liberal feminists may seem to be a biased analysis because this group has not had the benefit of living through the periods of the Civil Rights and Women's Liberation Movements. This point is noted.

²¹ This is not true of all of the women in the group. Three women recalled specific experiences where they felt that an individual's comments or behavior were racist.

²²One of the reasons that only white women were named is that there is a lack of women of color in U.S. electoral politics. When narrators spoke about improving the status of women, they seemed to assume that the benefactors would be white.

²³Proposition 187 which limits services to U.S. immigrants passed in 1994 and Proposition 209, called the California Civil Rights Initiative, which dismantles affirmative action policies at the state level, was passed in 1996.

²⁴Gender and spatial privilege also generally coincide.

²⁵Race, class, and gender are the most widely discussed components of inequality in the U.S. Other bases of discrimination not examined in depth here are additional characteristics such as age, sexual orientation, and physical appearance.

²⁶While only this one narrator employs this type of analysis of white culture in her narrative, it would be surprising if more of the feminists, especially those in the anti-racist group, do not recognize the ethnocentrism in denouncing that "white" Americans exist in a cultural void.

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APPENDIX 1

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS AND DEMOGRAPHIC SHEET

The listed questions were used to guide all of the interviews. Because of the conversational tone of the interviews, not all questions were asked in these exact words.

- Where did you grow up?
- What was your family composition?
- What type of political affiliation were your parents involved in? (i.e. liberal, conservative?)
- Do you recall your parents vocalizing their beliefs on issues such as affirmative action (i.e. people of color, and women's issues) and interracial marriage?
- Were your caregivers involved in any activism?
- How did you first learn about women's issues?
- How/When did you become involved with feminist activities?
- How do you feel that feminism affects your life?
- Why are feminist issues important to you? What effect do you think feminism has on society?
- What kind of effect would you like for your feminist activities to have?
- What are your greatest concerns in regards to the contemporary status of women in the United States?

- What is the most important goal of contemporary feminism?
- Do you feel that issues of race and women are connected?
In what way?
- Are there many people of different races working in your organization? Do you perceive that their priorities for the organization are different from your own?
- Have you ever been involved in an organization that worked for the progress of a different racial group than your own?
- Have you encountered any women working in activist organizations who you felt were racist?
- Do you remember the first time you noticed that somebody was a different color from you? When was this?
- Have you had close friendships with people of different races from you? Any romantic relationships? Did you encounter problems on account of racial differences?
- What was the ethnic composition of your neighborhood? Did anyone of a different race live on your street?
- How far away did someone from a difference race live from you?
- Was there any neighborhood splintering that you can remember (i.e. latinos living on the other side of the freeway)?

- What about the composition of your classes in elementary and high schools?
- Were there any race based clubs on your high school campus? How about on your college campus?
- Do you remember feeling left out of any activities because of your race? Have you felt any threat as an outsider?
- Have you been involved in activities/organizations where the participants were exclusively, but not necessarily white?
- What do you think are the root causes of racism?
- Have you ever interacted with someone who acted in an overtly racist manner? How did you feel in this interaction?
- How do you feel about the current state of race relations in the U.S.?
- How do you feel about whites becoming a minority in the state of California? How is this affecting the perception of people of color by other whites?
- How can you explain the recent propositions passed in California that limit services to immigrants and nullify affirmative action policies?

- Do you see the U.S. as a melting pot? How do you feel about viewing race in a color-blind manner?
- Have you ever really thought of yourself as white? How do you think this affects your life?
- Do you think that being white has given you a privileged status?

Please respond to the following questions about some personal information.

What is your marital status? _____

Please describe your sexual orientation:

Please describe your race and ethnicity:

Please note your age range:

____ 18-24 ____ 25-32 ____ 33-40 ____ 41-48 ____ 49-56
____ 57 and up

Please indicate your income:

____ \$0-\$9999	
____ \$10,000-\$19,999	____ \$60,000-\$69,999
____ \$20,000-\$29,999	____ \$70,000-\$79,999
____ \$30,000-\$39,999	____ \$80,000 and up
____ \$40,000-\$49,999	
____ \$50,000-\$59,999	

Please describe your job title:

APPENDIX 2

HUMAN SUBJECTS RELEASE FORM

AGREEMENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH
SAN JOSE STATE UNIVERSITY

This study seeks to gather information via audiotaped interviews on feminist's attitudes toward race relations in the United States. We are looking at how your experiences growing up and in women's organizations have influenced your ideas about people of color.

All research projects contain potential benefits and risks to you as a research subject. Possible risks to you might be in revealing confidential information about yourself, family, or friends, which might pose personal embarrassment to you and others. In addition, psychological stress might also be a factor in participating in this research.

Benefits to you in participating in this research include a greater understanding and awareness of yourself and your ideas about race. You may also be able to explore how you formed your beliefs about different racial groups and analyze the meanings this has for you.

The results from this study may be published, but any information from this study that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission. Your identity will be known only to the interviewer and the principle investigator.

Any questions about your participation in this study will be answered by Dr. Wendy L. Ng, 924-5594 or contacted through the Sociology Department at San Jose State University. Complaints about the procedures may be presented to Dr. Robert Gliner. For any questions or complaints about research subject's rights, or in the event of a research related injury, contact Serena Stanford, Ph.D. (Associated Academic Vice President for Graduate Studies & Research) at 924-2480.

Your decision to participate in this study is entirely voluntary and you may refuse to participate in this study or withdraw at any time, without affecting your relationship with San Jose State University or any department involved with this study.

I HAVE READ THE ABOVE INFORMATION AND HAVE MADE A DECISION WHETHER OR NOT TO PARTICIPATE. MY SIGNATURE INDICATES THAT

I HAVE DECIDED TO PARTICIPATE AND I HAVE RECEIVED A COPY OF THIS FORM FOR MY FILES.

Date

Subject's Signature

Investigator's Signature

Interviewer's Signature