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“Two Totally Different People”: Dissonance of Intersecting Identities in White College Women

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This phenomenological study explored the intersecting privileged (racial) and oppressed (gender) identities of eight White college women. Through three interviews, this study aimed to understand how the participants experience socially conflicting identities. Findings indicated that the participants felt more connected to their gender than their race. In addition, participants experienced dissonance when considering how their gender and racial identities work to form a holistic self. Implications for student affairs research and practice are shared.

The undergraduate college experience promises students a chance to examine their identities; however, the ways students engage in college may only develop their privileged or oppressed identities, treating them as mutually exclusive. Providing educational opportunities to deepen knowledge of how identities intersect is crucial to helping college students inhabit all identities simultaneously (Torres, Jones, & Renn, 2009). As a specific example, while participating in a workshop on societal privileges, a student voiced concerns that the activity only focused on privileges and neglected his oppressed identity. This anecdote displays the difficulties students experience while navigating how their oppressed and privileged identities intersect.

Crenshaw (n.d.) first formed the concept of intersectionality to address the intersection of gender and race for Black women to provide voice for marginalized individuals whose perspectives within feminism and racism had been typically ignored (Hutchinson, 2000; Nash, 2008). Crenshaw’s original concept of intersecting identities only pertained to Black women; the plethora of research on multiple identities typically neglects the understanding of how women make meaning of how their oppressed identities intersect with their privileged identities (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007; Croteau, Talbot, Lance, & Evans, 2002; Nash, 2008). Hutchinson (2000) stated, “intersectionality theory provides a formidable challenge to the notion that scholars can adequately examine or provide solutions to one form of subordination without analyzing how it is affected and shaped by other systems of domination” (p. 308). The current study aligns with Hutchinson’s notion to inform social justice work through exploring how White privilege influences women’s gender identity, as well as how it informs racism.

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The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore and understand how White undergraduate women describe the intersections of their racial and gender identities. The research site was a mid-sized master’s comprehensive public university in the upper Midwest. Participants were eight undergraduate, traditionally aged students who self-identified as White and female. The present study is significant in various ways. First, it looks to fill gaps in the extant literature on intersecting oppressed and privileged identities of college students. Next, results inform student development theory by describing the experiences of undergraduate White women’s gender and racial identity development, as well as their intersecting oppressed and privileged identities. Results suggest faculty and student affairs professionals form strategies that assist White college women in articulating their holistic identity development.

The following research questions guided the study:
1. How do undergraduate women describe their racial and gender identities?
   a. What do participants say it means to be White at the institution?
   b. What do participants say it means to be a woman at the institution?
   c. How do college women experience the intersection of privileged (White) and oppressed (woman) identities?

**RELATED LITERATURE**

The authors investigated literature pertaining to women’s gender development and White racial identity development to further understand how empirical research demonstrates individuals’ experiences with each identity. Furthermore, the authors explored literature on multiple and intersecting identity development to inform their understanding of how one identity may influence the experience of another identity.

**Women’s Gender Identity Development**

“(P)sychology has no adequate theory of women’s development” (Josselson, 1996, p. 9). Despite the lack of theory, theoretical literature on gender identity development reported that individuals’ sense of self as male, female, or otherwise is fixed in childhood and later intensified in adolescence (Bem, 1981; Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010). College women tend to act in ways that positively reinforce theirs and others’ perceptions of expected social gender norms and avoid behaviors and attitudes that are gender non-conforming (Bem, 1981). White and Gardner (2008) focus on how conforming to gender stereotypes can be harmful and advise against identifying with a collective group to avoid stereotype threat. In contrast, significant benefits result for women who identified with a collective group identity, rather than seeing themselves as individuals (Leaper & Arias, 2011). Gender roles and one’s sense of masculinity and femininity are key components of gender identity development (Bem, 1981; Evans et al., 2010).

Gilligan’s moral development study and Josselson’s (1996) psychobiography from a longitudinal study brought a different perspective on gender identity development. Gilligan (1982) demonstrated the significance relationships play in women’s moral development. For example, when women face an ethical dilemma, they typically consider how the decision will impact their
relationships with friends, family, and peers. Similar to Gilligan, Josselson argued that gender identity revolves significantly around women’s construction of their gender identity based on relationships with others.

**Women’s White Identity Development**

The most notable theory on White identity development is Janet Helms’s (1997) White Identity Development Model. The model consists of six stages, ranging from denial of racism to seeking out opportunities to better understand individuals from different cultures. Helms and other Whiteness researchers noted the importance of individuals accepting the cultural and social implications of their Whiteness (Blitz, 2006; Crowley-Long, 1995; Tatum, 1999; Taylor, 2008; Todd & Abrams, 2009).

Healthy White identity development is a necessity for multiple reasons (Denevi & Pastan, 2006; Taylor, 2008; Todd & Abrams, 2009). When Whites refuse to accept their skin color and only wish to be seen as an individual, they may continue to feel threatened by pride from other racial groups, which has the potential to perpetuate racial barriers (Denevi & Pastan, 2006; Taylor, 2008; Todd & Abrams, 2009). In addition, White identity development and discussions of White privilege can be challenging for White college students because dialogue may generate feelings of guilt, anger, hostility, outrage, and denial. Niehuis (2005) postulated that developing White students’ racial identities is essential to combating racism.

**Women’s Intersecting Identities**

As previously indicated, Crenshaw (n.d.) developed the concept of intersectionality to give voice to marginalized populations that had been silenced in the past. Thus, existing research has focused on the interplay between varying intersecting oppressed identities (e.g., Black and gay) and how the intersection of two oppressed identities may lead students to focus more on one identity than another due to lack of institutional support (Goode-Cross & Tager, 2011; Parks, Hughes, & Matthews, 2004). In one study, it was nearly impossible for Black female participants to describe their racial identity without discussing their gender identity and vice versa (Thomas, Hacker, & Hoxha, 2011), illustrating that some individuals experience social identities separately, while others view their social identities as inherently linked.

Empirical research on intersecting identities has shown that differences in experiencing one’s identity depends on social and environmental contexts. For example, Abes et al. (2007) described one participant who felt more connected to her sexual orientation because society saw it as “abnormal.” Another participant described how her connectedness to a certain identity was influenced by whether or not she was discriminated against for that identity at that time (Abes et al., 2007). Visibility of the identity also influences its saliency for the individual. More visible identities, such as race or gender, typically become more salient (Abes et al., 2007; Croteau et al.; Goode-Cross & Tager, 2011; Jones, 2009; Skorobohacz, 2008). For instance, Black, gay men revealed that they felt more connected to their race than their sexual orientation (Goode-Cross & Tager, 2011). In addition to current social and environmental influences on identity, Skorobohacz’s (2008) study describes an individual’s choice to interact with certain
identities more than others. These choices are often based on previous life experiences associated with each identity.

The empirical literature on the intersection of privileged and oppressed identities is sparse (Nash, 2008; Torres et al., 2009). However, theoretical research provides some insight into the intersection of privileged and oppressed identities. Collins’ (1990) theoretical “Matrix of Domination” posits:

[A]ll groups possess varying amounts of penalty and privilege in one historically created system. In this system, for example, white women are penalized by their gender but privileged by their race. Depending on the context, an individual may be an oppressor, a member of an oppressed group, or simultaneously oppressor and oppressed. (p. 225)

Individuals’ privileged and oppressed identities allow them to be the oppressed and the oppressor in difference contexts, which is also supported by empirical research (Abes et al., 2007). Additional theories postulate that individuals can inhabit privileged and oppressed identities simultaneously to inform a holistic identity of self (Collins, 1990; Torres et al., 2009).

The small body of empirical literature informing intersecting social identities notes that individuals experience identities based on their social marking as privileged or oppressed (Croteau et al., 2002; DiAngelo, 2006; Ibrahim, 2010). Individuals recognize and experience socially oppressed identities more frequently than socially privileged identities (DiAngelo, 2006; Johnson, 2001; Jones, 2009; Kivel, 2004). More specifically, White women will connect more with their gender identity than their racial identity due to their weak connection with Whiteness (Leaper & Arias, 2011). Interestingly, in contrast, White female student affairs professionals more readily discussed privileges afforded by their skin color than by their oppressed gender identity (Croteau et al., 2002). Privileged and oppressed identities intersect in a variety of ways, and saliency is sculpted by multiple factors.

Croteau and colleagues (2002) noted the importance of studying specific privileged and oppressed identity samples to further understand the interplay of privilege and oppression for specific identities, thus, asserting the importance of addressing White women independently from Women of Color or White men. In addition, though women have been historically oppressed, they do not represent a minority identity since they are in the numeric majority on college campuses, which provides a unique perspective on experiencing multiple identities.

Little research has been conducted on the construction of a holistic identity through experiencing a privileged and oppressed identity simultaneously (Croteau et al., 2002; Hutchinson, 2000; Nash, 2008; Torres et al., 2009).

METHODS

The purpose of this study was to explore how White college women conceptualize their intersecting racial and gender identities. The strategy of inquiry was phenomenology informed by a social constructivist perspective. Thomas et al. (2011) justified the use of phenomenology in identity development research by positing that, “identity has been defined as a phenomenological experience of coming to understand oneself” (p. 530). In addition, the present study leaned strongly on Skorobohacz’s (2008) phenomenological work on graduate women’s intersecting identities, as well as the qualitative study by Croteau and colleagues (2002) on
intersecting privileged and oppressed identities of student affairs professionals to develop the methodology of the present study.

Research Site

The research site was a mid-sized, master’s comprehensive university in the upper Midwest. The university enrolls approximately 10,000 students, comprised of more than 90% undergraduates. Women make up 58.5% of the population, and the campus has a non-White student population of 7.6%. The average age for undergraduate students is 21 years of age. The 2010 retention rate was 85%, and the 6-year graduation rate was 69%. The most popular majors include biology, psychology, elementary education, exercise and sport science, and marketing. The 551 faculty include 48% women, 15% ethnic minorities, and 3% international employees.

Sample

Purposive sampling techniques recruited eight participants. The principal investigator and first author started garnering interest from female students with whom she had contact through her role as a graduate assistant in the LGBT Center on campus, as well as her graduate internship in Career Services. An undergraduate intern in Career Services spread the word about the study to individuals she knew. This strategy yielded half of the participants. In addition, three instructors (one from women’s, gender, and sexuality studies, and two instructors who teach an introductory course to first-year students) were encouraged to share the opportunity to participate in the study with students. This yielded five more potential participants. The final sample comprised eight participants who self-identified as traditionally aged college students (began their undergraduate experience immediately after high school), White, and cisgender women (those whose gender identity matches their assigned sex at birth). All but one of the participants were moderately to strongly engaged in social justice or identity-related work on campus through organizations or coursework. Thus, seven of the eight participants were likely drawn to the study due to their interest and more developed understanding of their race and gender identities. Overall, the sample of participants was generally interested in their identity development, which may differ from the larger pool of possible participants.

Of the eight participants, two grew up in cities with populations of more than 200,000, and five grew up in what they described as small, suburban or rural areas which were predominantly White. One participant identified as a gay woman and seven identified as heterosexual. The sample included one sociology major, two psychology majors, two communications majors, one biology major, one clinical lab science major, and one participant who was undecided. Two participants had minors that related to the study: ethnic and racial studies and women, gender, and sexuality studies, respectively. One participant was in her first year at the institution, one in her second year, three in their third year, one in her fourth year, and two in their fifth year.

This study reflects the perceptions of students who wanted to participate, and many of the participants may have been more versed in this research topic because of their major programs or interest in participating in diversity-related activities. The voices of those women who did not participate, but may have provided a more nuanced perspective, do not emerge from this study.
Further qualitative research exploring White women’s intersecting racial and gender identities should be conducted in other regions to aid in the transferability of the findings to other regional and institutional contexts.

Reflexivity

The concept of intersectionality prompted the first author to consider her own intersecting identities and the role they play in how she views herself holistically. As a White, middle class, heterosexual individual, she experiences a significant amount of privilege. She can walk into a room without thinking about her race, is not turned away for housing based on race, and is not seen as less intelligent because of her skin color. As a woman, however, she experiences oppression. She hears sexist comments about women’s intelligence, sees women’s bodies objectified, and lives in a world where one in four women experience violence in an intimate partnership (“The national intimate partner,” 2010). She only began to recognize these identities, as well as her holistic identity, with the help of college faculty and staff. She sought opportunities in classes and educational programs during her undergraduate and graduate years to learn more about her identities. Had she not, she feels she would understand her identities only in relation to her experiences, rather than how they fit into larger society and interactions with other individuals. This led her to wonder how other White college women experience their privileged racial identity with a traditionally oppressed gender identity in varying spaces (e.g., on campus, in society, with family and friends) and how those experiences have shaped their identity as White college women.

In relation to this, the first author needed to be aware of her perspective that women should be aware of their oppression and that Whites should be cognizant of their privileges. Therefore, it was important to construct questions that did not prompt this perspective. In addition, it is pertinent that she avoided trying to connect the participants’ identity development through her personal experiences, as each participant came from a different background, despite common racial and gender identities.

The second author is a heterosexual, White male professor in a student affairs graduate program who served this research project as faculty chair. In that role, he was a guide and peer debriefer and, later on, became a collaborator and editor in writing. He considers himself acting in solidarity with Persons of Color, women, and other marginalized groups of individuals. Given his roles as father to young daughters and spouse to his partner, he is committed to dismantling White male hegemony and patriarchy and conducts qualitative research on social justice advocacy of dominant college student groups.

Data Collection

Data collection took place between late October and late November 2012. The first author used three separate interviews for data collection. Interviews 1 and 2 focused on establishing an understanding of the participants’ experiences with their racial and gender identities separately. The third interview focused on the intersection of these two identities. Questions were based on Merriam’s (2002) notion of distilling the essence of participants’ lived experiences, as well as Creswell’s (2009) criteria, including asking open-ended and few questions. The intent of the three semi-structured interviews (Merriam, 2002) was to understand the experiences that
constructed participants’ meaning-making of their gender and racial identities and how those have intersected throughout their lives. Each of the 24 interviews lasted between 30 and 100 minutes and was audio recorded and transcribed verbatim, yielding 291 pages of single-spaced transcripts.

The first interview focused on women’s gender identity development and included questions about childhood experiences as a girl, such as, “What were some things you were told when you were young about how girls should behave?” The protocol also included more recent memories of gender identity: “What expectations do you think people have of you because you are a woman?” In addition, the first author probed for information regarding experiences with participants’ gender identity development at the institution.

Questions for the second interview targeted participants’ previous and present conceptions of White identity. Four questions focused on how participants felt about being White at the time of data collection. For instance, participants were asked to describe a time when they had a positive or negative experience because of their racial identity. The authors also aimed to ascertain participants’ understandings of their White identity development and race-specific experiences in classes or at diversity programs on campus.

The third interview focused on how participants made meaning of their intersecting identities. Participants were given a definition of intersecting identities and the first author encouraged them to ask clarifying questions. This interview focused on exploring which identity or identities had been or were currently most salient for participants and what experiences on campus influenced perceptions of connection to that identity. The interview began with writing down a list of 10 nouns they felt described their identity to explore what parts of their identities felt most salient, regardless of their connection to their racial or gender identities. In addition, the first author asked questions related to participants’ understandings of how the two identities worked simultaneously. For instance, “How do different spaces on campus (e.g., classroom, residence hall, lunch area, student organizations) make you feel about your identity as a White woman?”

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed Creswell’s (2009) and Merriam’s (2002) suggestions for processing qualitative research. Once data were collected and transcribed verbatim, the first author used open coding to highlight meaningful words, phrases, or passages that were expected or those that stood out as surprising (Creswell, 2009). Inductive reasoning dominated analysis through coding material to conceptualize preliminary, common chunks of data about participants’ perceptions of their racial and gender identities and the intersection of those identities.

Next, axial coding was used to tie together initial codes into larger data categories, which were closely related to the research questions and provided the structure for reporting the findings. In consultation with the second author, who also served as peer debriefer, final themes and subthemes were reconciled when the data were exhausted and each emerging theme was consistently grounded in the majority of the data. Four final themes emerged from the findings: Being White is Uncomfortable, Woman before White, Seeing Me for Me, and Dissonance: Being a White Woman.
Trustworthiness

To aid the trustworthiness of the data and findings, the first author invited participants to complete member checks via e-mail and to authenticate or critique preliminary interpretations of the data. Participants were asked to review themes that emerged from the study and to indicate whether they felt these themes were representative of the responses posed in their interviews. Seven of the eight participants responded with feedback. One student disagreed with one of the themes until the principal investigator described the theme in more detail. Another student said she trusted what she had said in the interview and did not feel it was necessary to comment on her current feelings toward the themes. Second, the first author used thick description and an audit trail (Merriam, 2002), which included interview transcripts, observer comments in the transcripts to begin the analytic process, observational notes taken during interviews and field notes about procedures and questions after the interviews, and memos written to begin to delineate possible themes (Creswell, 2009).

FINDINGS

Being White Is Uncomfortable

Seven of the eight participants described the ways in which their White skin color caused a sense of discomfort at some point throughout their undergraduate experience. Participants’ discomfort with their racial identity derived from being associated with racist acts committed by other White individuals. Helen (all names changed) described her feelings associated with her skin color after reading a racist social media post written by a White woman: “[I]t made me feel ashamed to be White because of how other White people were behaving.” From this quote, it is evident that Helen felt that her White skin could link her to White individuals who commit racist acts. Kira and Kathy did not feel connected to others’ actions by a similar racial identity. Kira explained, “it doesn’t make me feel … bad that I’m White,” when describing her feelings toward learning about racist acts in American history.

Despite ambivalent perceptions among participants about their association with White racism, seven of the eight participants recognized a barrier or discomfort when interacting with People of Color. Michelle explained how she needed to be “more delicate and be more careful about how [she] phrase[d] things, so that people don’t misunderstand what [she’s] saying as ignorance.” Kathy described not wanting to “step on toes” or “say the wrong thing” when interacting with people from different racial backgrounds. Elaine explicitly described how talking about race during the interview made her feel uncomfortable: “I feel really uneasy about the way that I’m saying things because I … like I said, people don’t want to be called racist, and I feel that right now [others may be judging me as racist].”

Woman Before White

Six participants felt a strong connection to their identity as a woman. When I asked the women to write down 10 nouns that described them, six wrote “woman/female,” while only two participants wrote White. Elaine expressed how she “think[s] about being a woman, without
thinking, like it just automatically comes.” Brooke examined her connection to her gender identity: “That is a huge part of my identity … That would probably be what I identify with most.” Jodi felt more connected to her gender identity than her racial identity but did not feel very connected to either: “I wouldn’t say that I feel connected to being a woman because I don’t fit into all the categories that a woman should fit into by our society’s standards.” Carrie was the only participant who felt a stronger connection to her privileged racial identity: “Um, I think I think about being White a little bit more so than I do about being female. Although, I think about both of them quite a lot actually. Just ‘cause of the nature of my pursuits.” She attributed her strong racial saliency to her ethnic and racial studies minor.

Aside from identifying as female, five participants noted a sense of pride in their gender identity, “I feel like I love being a woman. … it makes me feel proud, (Michelle).” Despite some participants feeling proud to be a woman, seven ascribed a negative experience or feeling due to their gender identity quite easily. Elaine’s initial response to inquiry about negative experiences associated with her gender was, “There’s a lot of times … I don’t like how women are kind of trapped into certain career choices … just, that double standard that is seen between men and women is frustrating, definitely.” In addition, some struggled to determine a positive feeling or experience related to their gender identity: “Mmm [long pause]. I can’t think of anything. That’s bad [laughs],” was Helen’s response to the question asking her to describe a positive experience ascribed to her identity as a woman.

In addition, positive experiences associated with participants’ womanhood often related to their perceptions of exceedingly low societal expectations for what a woman could accomplish: “When I think of a positive experience, it has to do with like being a woman is great because I’m a strong, independent woman, and that’s totally related to the fact that society says I shouldn’t be a strong, independent woman” (Brooke). In essence, the pride Brooke felt in relation to her gender was a result of connecting with women who had moved beyond negative stereotypes associated with their gender.

**Seeing Me for Me**

Six participants provided examples of how they felt constrained by the societal expectations or gender role stereotypes applied to women, which caused conflict when identifying as a woman. They did not want to be framed by society’s expectations because it hindered others from seeing them for their unique selves and caused negative experiences when they did not meet those expectations. Helen described people’s reactions to her shaved head after donating her hair to a charitable cause: “I had a lot of people that didn’t know me give me some horrendous looks. And, it’s just because I [didn’t look like] their definition of what women should [look like].” Elaine also illustrated the pressures she sensed to behave or appear a certain way:

I still have to worry about being a woman because of the traditional gender roles people place upon me and how frustrating that is because of the consequences of being a woman because of how our society’s constructed and the patriarchy that we live in. So, that is a constant frustration, and constantly frustrating having … my intelligence … docked down just because of my identity as a woman.
The notion of wanting to be seen as an individual rather than as a member of a collective social identity was also prevalent in relation to racial identity expectations and stereotypes. None of the participants wanted others to assume they were ignorant to racism because of their Whiteness. Michelle described an experience she encountered during her participation in a social justice-related performance group: “I remember being really upset that [a fellow student] assumed that I was treating him differently because he was Black and that he expected me to act that way because I’m White.” Michelle, like several other participants, did not want her skin color to create preconceived notions about her personality or character.

Dissonance: Being a White Woman

Participants experienced tension between the intersection of their racial identity and gender identity differently. Five participants felt conflicted and challenged by the interaction between their privileged racial identity and oppressed gender identity. When asking participants to discuss how being a White woman made them feel, Kathy answered, “Like it’s two totally different people … if I’m the only White person among all people of a different race, it would make me feel uncomfortable. When I think about being a woman amongst other women, I wouldn’t feel so uncomfortable.” Elaine described this in terms of her privilege: “I feel really torn. I feel at times very privileged, um, even when talking about men, men of minority backgrounds. But, in comparison to White men, I feel like shit. I don’t … I don’t like it.” As evidenced by these statements, the participants had a much easier time describing their gender and racial identities separately.

Although most participants found it challenging to describe the intersection of their privileged and oppressed identities, three participants had a different perspective. Helen felt the identities evened one another out, while Carrie felt her privilege outweighed her oppressed identity. Michelle seemed very comfortable with her two identities and how she could utilize them to her advantage for social justice reform:

I definitely feel like being White is, uh, really nice in that it gives me a lot of advantages, especially as a woman, in that I can use my, uh, my, you know, my identity as a female to relate with people, but I can also use my privilege as a White person to kind of like, have an upper hand, and you know, be able to express views that I think wouldn’t be taken seriously if I were a Female of Color.

Regardless of Michelle’s fairly developed conception of her identity as a White woman, she indicated she had not given the intersection of those two identities much thought previously.

Thoughts about intersectionality of gender and racial identities were, perhaps, underdeveloped in the participants because of experiences with programs and courses on campus. Despite attending educational programs and taking classes which addressed social identities, five participants indicated academic or co-curricular activities only focused on one part of their identity. Kira pointed out how courses typically discussed her identities separately: “It’s not something that I think about in classes much, like how they intersect very much, but I do think of them both individually more in some psych classes versus others.” Several other participants echoed the separate experiences and development of racial and gender identities. However, Elaine, a sociology major, Carrie, an ethnic and racial studies minor, and Michelle, a women’s, gender, and sexuality studies minor, felt their classes and out-of-class involvement influenced their ability to understand how their racial and gender identities intersect, even if they never
specifically discussed the intersectionality of identifying as a White woman. This more deeply developed understanding of identity likely stemmed from their major coursework in the social sciences.

Participants felt discomfort with their White skin color as it related to transracial relationships and privilege. Related to this discomfort, the participants felt more comfortable identifying with their oppressed gender than with their privileged race. Regardless of this connection, they would prefer for society to perceive them as individuals and not be categorized by their racial or gender identities as stereotypes of these categories may limit perceptions of their abilities. Overall, being a White woman with intersecting privileged and oppressed identities prompted a feeling of dissonance for many participants.

**DISCUSSION**

The findings indicate that identifying as an undergraduate, White woman was conflicting for the participants. The main source of this conflict was discrepancies in perceiving oppressed gender identity and privileged racial identity. Participants noted a discomfort with their socially privileged White identity (Helms, 1997). The women felt that identifying strongly with their race associated them with other White individuals, including those who may be labeled racist due to their overt prejudice. In addition, participants aimed to avoid being considered racist by expressing themselves carefully when conversing about race, avoiding the discussion of race, or avoiding interactions with individuals from different racial backgrounds. These findings suggest that college educators should engage White college students on the manifestations of racism in dominant culture, institutions, and systems perpetuating racism and socializing all Whites, whether they aim to or not. Discussing this with White college students is important to fostering social justice on campus and in society. Todd and Abrams (2009) confirmed that White privilege creates the aforementioned barriers. Findings from the present study indicated the lack of awareness of one’s White racial identity and the privileges associated with it as additional catalysts for such barriers. Though some participants grasped the meaning of White privilege, they did not connect with or think about this identity as much as their oppressed gender identity as women, which supports previous findings (DiAngelo, 2006; Johnson, 2001; Jones, 2009; Kivel, 2004; Leaper & Arias, 2011).

Contrary to Croteau et al. (2002), who indicated that participants who identified as White women more readily discussed the privilege associated with their skin color, findings in the present study demonstrated that participants more readily described their experiences as oppressed women. The participants not only discussed their oppressed identity more, but they also readily shared negative experiences associated with their gender identity. This, in turn, gave some participants a sense of pride (Abes et al., 2007; DiAngelo, 2006; Johnson, 2001; Jones, 2009; Kivel, 2004).

Regardless of the women’s connection with their oppressed identity, they wanted to be seen as individuals, separate from their socially constructed identities and the associated stereotypes. This confirms Josselson’s (1996) assertion that women view themselves through others’ or society’s perspectives. Theory also suggested that women will act in ways that reinforce these societal gender norms (Bem, 1981; Josselson, 1996). These theories contradict findings from the present study, in which participants wanted to avoid the confines of socially constructed gender
norms (Bem, 1981; Josselson, 1996). Some women showed discomfort with fitting certain
gender norms and a pride in rejecting gendered expectations as a way of combating oppression. Avoiding stereotypes for White women also provided participants an escape from discomfort associated with negative stereotypes. Results reflected White and Gardner’s (2008) work describing the importance of women identifying as individuals to avoid negative stereotype threat.

The participants in the current study also felt conflicted about how their privileged and oppressed identities intersected. Many struggled with determining how to navigate the intersection of oppressed and privileged identity, confirming the work of Croteau and colleagues (2002). Despite their involvement in identity reflection through courses and cocurricular activities, participants still found inhabiting both identities challenging. This struggle was based on a higher level of comfort with their oppressed identity than their privileged identity. In addition, the participants experienced the intersection of their privileged and oppressed identities differently depending on environment, education, and social context, confirming findings by Abes and colleagues (2007) on intersecting identities. In sum, the findings of this study demonstrate that negotiating a privileged racial and oppressed gender identity may be challenging for White undergraduate women.

Implications and Recommendations

The results of this study suggest a potential need for change in current institutional programming and pedagogy. First, student affairs professionals should establish more ways to focus on developing acceptance of one’s privileged identities, specifically White privilege, to balance the level of comfort with privileged and oppressed identities. With a more even level of comfort with identities, students can develop a better understanding of their holistic selves. In order to develop comfort, students must first develop acceptance of their White privilege (Blitz, 2006; Crowley-Long, 1995; Tatum, 1999; Taylor, 2008; Todd & Abrams, 2009). Niehuis (2005) recommended providing opportunities to explore the real effects of White privilege from a Person of Color’s perspective through activities that aim to deconstruct racial stereotypes. Such activities could include instructing students to find, read, and analyze a children’s book with a Woman of Color as a protagonist or to find, study, and instruct peers on a grocery item depicting a Black family. Consequently, students should be invited to reflect on White privilege and the pervasiveness of White culture, perhaps in blogs or in journals. Residence hall directors and other student affairs professionals could implement similar activities, specifically into student staff training. In general, White college women may benefit from activities that allow them to unbundle how White privilege influences their everyday activities, in addition to exploring how White privilege influences the everyday lives of multicultural individuals. This can be done through reflective assignments, research assignments, service learning initiatives, performance-based diversity groups, interviewing individuals, and discussion in various settings. One critical setting is the classroom. White women could benefit from classes that require them to explore the issues of White privilege and identity because it would allow them to feel more comfortable with their privilege.

Participants found current programs or courses on separate racial or gender identities to be beneficial in developing their identities separately. These programs or courses are significant in establishing a solid foundation for identity development. To provide students with a deeper
understanding of their intersecting racial and gender identities, student affairs professionals should develop programs which prompt students to reflect more on the privileges and marginalization stemming from each part of their identity. These programs or courses can be offered under the auspices of already existing student affairs units. For instance, a women’s center may typically focus on how one’s gender identity is marginalized. Having the space for this discussion is important; the women’s center would help develop student identities if they incorporated discussion and activities that address women’s privileged identities as well.

We do not recommend reorganizing student affairs offices that center on marginalized identities (e.g., LGBT centers, multicultural centers, women’s centers), as it would be impossible to create offices to cover each intersection and because these separate offices serve an important role in creating support for marginalized populations. Rather, we suggest finding other means for intersectional identity reflection opportunities. This may include more student organizations, allowing individuals to discuss more than one identity at a time. For example, having intergroup dialogues for White women, queer People of Color, gay Christians, and Black women may help students understand how those identities influence perspectives of self and others. In addition, more intentional discussion about how intersecting identities create unique experiences would be beneficial. For instance, providing a forum in a residence hall where White and multicultural women can discuss differing experiences due to skin color, even though both groups identify as women, would allow participants to understand how multiple identities influence life experiences.

Furthermore, discussion and reflections revolving around how to utilize privileged and oppressed identities to further promote social justice are pertinent to successfully inhabiting identities that appear mutually exclusive. The goal of these conversations or activities is to help White college women learn how they can utilize their privilege to benefit less socially privileged individuals. It would also be useful to help White college women understand how to use their oppressed identities to connect with others who may share similar experiences. As a result, students may feel less conflicted about how their privileged and oppressed identities form a holistic identity.

The study also holds implications for student development theory. White identity development models, such as Helms (1997), should consider how intersecting identities may alter one’s development, as Crenshaw (n.d.) posited when discussing Black women’s identity development in relation to anti-racist and feminist work (Hutchinson, 2000; Nash, 2008). Just as Black women’s identity development differs from White women’s, White women’s racial identity development may differ from White men’s racial identity development. Because women share the experience of oppression, they may feel less privileged than White men. Researchers interested in developmental theory on intersecting identities can use findings from this study as well as Croteau et al. (2002) to build a more foundational theory on the interplay of privileged and oppressed identities and their influence on identity development. This could be done by utilizing Abes et al.’s (2007) theory on the influence of environmental factors on the saliency of intersecting identities. Collins’ (1990) matrix theorizes that individuals can inhabit privileged and oppressed identities simultaneously. More research needs to explore how individuals develop a type of “self-authorship” where they seek opportunities to understand how they can use their privileged and oppressed identities to benefit social justice movements in America. More research on the roles privilege and oppression play in one’s intersecting identity development would provide a more solid foundation for a theoretical framework.
Suggestions for Further Research

Additional studies exploring how individuals experience the intersection of varying oppressed and privileged identities would provide a more solid foundation of intersectionality research. Since the majority of research on intersecting identities focuses on how multiple oppressed identities interplay, researchers should concentrate on how undergraduate students experience their privileged and oppressed identities and utilize these to shape their holistic identity to gain broader perspectives on the meaning of intersecting identities. This research should not be limited to White women or racial and gender identities but should explore other individuals with intersecting privileged and oppressed identities: Men of Color, White queer individuals, or White individuals with low socioeconomic status are just a few examples of possible populations to explore.

CONCLUSION

Overall, findings in this study suggest that White undergraduate college women may experience their racial and gender identities with dissonance. White college women may more strongly identify with their gender and present feelings of discomfort with their White identity. Overall, participants experienced the privilege of their racial identity and oppression of their gender identity in a conflicting manner which challenged their ability to think of themselves in a holistic sense.

The challenges associated with discerning how one’s differing identities intersect with one another not only affect individuals struggling with identity development but also those with whom they interact. For example, the discomfort of being White reflects the vicious cycle of barriers created by racial tensions, which must be realized by all individuals in society to create more understanding of how race influences relationships. In addition, comprehending struggles of developing identities prompts individuals to reflect on their own intersecting identity development. Beyond reflection of how identity influences one’s internal feelings, individuals should aim to understand how those identities influence their relationships with others in broader American society.

To allow these realizations to occur, college educators should focus more effort on curricular and cocurricular strategies for developing the intersection of privileged and oppressed identities. As student affairs professionals, after separating each part of a student’s fabric of identity, we must work to weave the fabric back together to help students create holistic understandings of themselves.

REFERENCES


