

Confronting Becky: An autocritographic examination of white women's gendered racism in higher education

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Abstract

White women are socialized to use their gender subordination as a defense when confronted with their racism. Using intersectionality, I built a framework intertwining idealized objectification standards and racial gatekeeping to reveal how white women use specific practices to gain and maintain power and restrict access from People of Color. Through autocritography, a self-study methodology focused on telling and retelling stories, I examined how gendered practices protected and insulated me from addressing my active racism. I detailed a series of events that occurred in my role as a social justice educator at a south-eastern public university in the US and highlighted my attempts to maintain my reputation as a 'good' white woman. I also discovered consequences I faced for not upholding this reputation. My findings revealed several ways that white supremacy maintains itself in our society using ties to our socialized norms and expectations. I finished with a discussion of how this study relates to and further supports studies regarding the negative experiences of People of Color in higher education. Finally, I share implications for students, staff, and faculty both inside and outside of the classroom using three artifacts: a case study, an email response, and a twitter post.

Keywords: gendered racism; racial gatekeeping; racism; student affairs; white supremacy

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Introduction

Despite the many Black feminist scholars and historical researchers who have commented on the underestimation and under examination of white women's gendered racist practices (Collins, 1990; Combahee River Collective, 1977/2015),

their voices have been largely ignored, dismissed, and/or co-opted in higher education. These scholars called for further investigation of how white women's unique combination of dominant and subordinate social identities work together to both mask their racial privilege and protect them from naming their active racist practices (Collins, 1990; Daniel, 2019). As a white woman social justice educator, I took up this call by investigating how white women's historical and socialized roles in higher education as both idealized objects and racial gatekeepers allow us to actively perpetuate racism while also avoiding accountability for our actions.

I recognize the variety and diversity in the concept of women, womanhood, and racial identification; therefore, I use white women to signify any people who see themselves as women and identify as white in their racial identity and are subjected to the socialization that accompanies these identities (Bondi, 2012; Butler, 1999). Also, throughout this paper, I follow Crenshaw's (1991) practice of refraining from capitalizing white as it is not a cultural category in the same way that other racial groups are such as Black, Asian, Indigenous, etcetera.

Though white women's racism is not directed solely towards Black people, so much of Higher Education's historical roots in the US stem from the incorporation of slavery into its foundation (Bondi, 2012; Gusa, 2010; hooks, 1989). Therefore, many of my literature examples speak directly to this relationship. Finally, often in my writing I refer to my connection to the study as a white woman using pronouns such as us, we, my, and/or me. In doing so, I aim to continuously connect myself to the internalized dominance and racist practices I outline in this study. I do not intend to isolate readers who identify differently, but rather use this method to remind myself and other white women that we are subject to the same inherited patterns of white supremacy and are not immune to racial prejudice.

What's up with Becky?: Exploring the problem and purpose

Studies of white women in higher education have documented common fears that are uniquely tied to their socialization as both white and women such as: being labeled as racist, making mistakes, or causing harm to and for People of Color (Dalpra & Vianden, 2017; Linder, 2015). White women often use these fears as excuses to avoid engaging in cross-racial conversations. Such fears stem directly from our socialization as white women who are taught to be conflict avoidant (Gillespie, Ashbaugh, & DeFiore, 2002) and innocent harmonizers (Ozias, 2017) who desire that everyone get along. For white women, being associated with racists or racism connects historically (Dalpra & Vianden, 2017) to the assumption that

racists are ‘bad’ and, if they are to maintain their façade as ‘good’ white women, they must protect their reputation at all costs (Daniel, 2019; Ozias, 2017). To understand this dynamic, I engaged in autocritography, a branch of autoethnography focused on both the telling and retelling of stories (Awkward, 1999; A. Johnson, 2014, 2017).

In US higher education environments, white students are exposed to different and challenging world views and life experiences, often for the very first time (Cabrera, 2012). However, despite this exposure, these environments are also where racist practices go unchecked and unchallenged (Gusa, 2010; hooks, 1989). These unchecked racist practices inhibit learning for Students of Color and perpetuate hostile campus climates keeping students from learning and faculty and staff from reaching their full potential (Gusa, 2010). Simultaneously, what appears to be a positive environment for white women given their increasing representation as students (DiPrete & Buchmann, 2013), post-graduate degree earners (H. L. Johnson, 2017), and educators in various fields (Pritchard & McChesney, 2018; Robbins, 2016), is in fact deeply harmful.

Oppression does not just hurt the oppressed, but the oppressor as well (Freire, 2000). To have the privilege and the power may appear beneficial, however, the oppressors ‘suffocate in their own possessions and no longer are; they merely have’ (Freire, 2000, p. 58). By dehumanizing others to maintain their power and possessions, dominant group members lose a piece of their own humanity and, in turn, dehumanize themselves. For white women to reach our full potential not just for ourselves as individuals but as members of our campus communities, we must recognize the systems we influence, how we influence them, and what we can do to influence them in positive, sustainable ways.

The intersections of gender and race: Developing a framework

Though white women experience our own forms of oppression, our whiteness allows us different access and privileges that are denied to Black women (Crenshaw, 1991). Given its focus on complexity, intersectionality offers a necessary lens for the study of white women. Its very history, rooted in the study of Black women’s oppression, tasks white women to examine, as researchers, their own potentially problematic and oppressive perspectives (Carbado et al., 2013; Dill & Zambrana, 2009). As a white woman, socialization influences how I see myself in combined racialized and gendered ways. Only by investigating how these identities interact with each other can I name and disrupt how these power dynamics support my complicity in racism.

Idealized Objects

For this study, I looked at white women participation in and benefits from gendered racism. Though all women are subject to objectification in their society (Wollstonecraft et al., 1792/2014), the process looks markedly different when examined at intersections of race. This objectification operates from a hierarchal order of women based on their bodies, their sexual appeal, their usefulness, and their ability to manage themselves and each other (Crouse-Dick, 2012). This order is, of course, a white ideal in which white women have perpetually maintained the top of the hierarchy (Collins, 1990). The closer women model this ideal, the more access to power they gain. In this tenuous power relationship, white women are set as the ideal objects and moderators of the idealized state. They decide who does and does not meet the standards, further upholding this hierarchy. Furthermore, bettering white women's situations does not challenge the overall hierarchical structure (Daniel, 2019; Ozias, 2017).

White women are expected to maintain an image of innocence, purity, and naiveté (Daniel, 2019; Ozias, 2017). Because white women are positioned as the ideals of what a woman should and can be, they are often the first and loudest voice on what is 'right,' 'good,' and 'decent' (Daniel, 2019; Ozias, 2017). The relationship between their gender and racial socialization allows them to maintain access to power denied to Women of Color but it comes at a cost. To hold on to a semblance of power they must hold on to antiquated ideals and expectations.

Racial Gatekeepers

Organizations often have gatekeepers, people who exist in the mid-level positions of the hierarchical structure and possess great access to power yet are often overlooked or dismissed by the organization's members (Corra & Willer, 2002). White women commonly hold these types of positions (mid-level managers, associate directors, assistant deans, etc.) in higher education (H. L. Johnson, 2017; Pritchard & McChesney, 2018), controlling access to power and gifted with the loyalty and trust of the administrators who are often white men (Daniel, 2019). Because of their combined race and gender, white women are assumed to be loyal, trustworthy, and harmless and therefore granted unfettered and unsupervised control over those below them – usually People of Color (Daniel, 2019). Their combined perceived innocence and the lack of oversight enables their racist practices to run rampant.

Historical events such as writing off white women slave owners (Jones-Rogers, 2019), white women suffragettes' willingness to work around and over Black women (Catt, 1918), and refusing to grant equal access to Black Deans of

Women like Lucy Diggs Slowe (Slowe, 1936) offer insight into how white women did and continue to use their status and roles as racial gatekeepers in higher education institutions today (Daniel, 2019; Ozias, 2017). Instead of working in solidarity across marginalized groups, white women often continue to support the white men who grant them gatekeeper roles (Daniel, 2019) and fall back on the assumptions that they are innocent, ignorant, and meek in order to maintain their racial privileges (Daniel, 2019; Ozias, 2017). Actions such as silence (DiAngelo, 2012) and performing pitiable emotions (Accapadi, 2007; Daniel, 2019) become tools to protect them from challenges to their power while also hurting anyone—People of Color—who would question their authority.

Method

My position as a white woman social justice educator at a predominantly white southern institution had everything to do with the intersections of my race and gender. Everyday my context and my identities collided in complex ways. What I learned about performing my white womanliness, how I desired to do my job, and what the institution envisioned for me were often in conflict. It is this relationship between self, group, and context that I examined in this study.

Research design and approach

Autocritography, developed from autoethnography, uses rhetoric and autobiography to critique the relationship between one person and systems of power (Awkward, 1999; A. Johnson, 2014, 2017). As stories are told and re-told, autocritographers and their readers analyze these various interpretations to unearth the power dynamics and oppressive systems influencing their behaviors, feelings, and thoughts (A. Johnson, 2014, 2017). This intentionally critical approach to autoethnography requires an examination of systems steeped in oppressive historical and current policies and practices such as higher education (Awkward, 1999).

By using autocritography to investigate how Southeastern university insulated and encouraged my racist practices as a white woman social justice educator, I was able to interrogate the relationship between institutional gendered racism and white women.

Research questions

Autocritography is often devoid of formal research questions (Awkward, 1999; A. Johnson, 2014, 2017), however, I used the following questions to guide my

examination: (a) how have I practiced gendered racism as a white woman social justice educator at a predominantly white institution and (b) how has the institution insulated and empowered me in those practices?

In this analysis I examined how the sexism I navigate as a woman also gifted me tools to mask my racism and served as a defense against taking responsibility for my actions. The two different versions of the stories that I relayed describing a series of events between myself and the institution allowed me to examine the power dynamics that occurred (Awkward, 1999). They also allowed me to create complex interpretations (A. Johnson, 2014, 2017) that encompassed the breadth of the systemic oppression at play (Awkward, 1999).

Sources and procedure

In my role, I oversaw the required social justice education program that all new undergraduate students experienced upon their arrival to Southeastern University, a dialogic based, peer-facilitated program called Peer-to-Peer Dialogues (P2P). During my tenure, this program was called into question due to its social justice nature and tenor. During the examination process of this program, I had several meetings and interactions with upper administrators at the institution. From these interactions I was able to generate stories.

Sources: To shape these stories, I used three different types of data: (a) reflexive journals, (b) artifacts, and (c) self-interviews. In my bi-weekly structured reflexive journal I tracked my reactions and interactions with the data collection, analysis, and writing processes (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2013; Hughes & Pennington, 2017). Artifacts such as email correspondence, documents detailing the programs and the requested changes, and news stories worked to both bolster my memory of the event as well as connect the on-campus happenings to the wider context (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2013; Hughes & Pennington, 2017; Raab, 2013). Finally, four semi-structured self-interviews allowed me to analyze my own memories in intentionally critical ways by interrogating my understandings of these events. Through these interviews I uncovered oppressive assumptions and beliefs I operated with during these experiences (Ellis, 2004).

Generating stories: I then pulled these data sources together through assemblage, a way of layering the sources together to create a complex and detailed recreation these events (Hughes & Pennington, 2017). Given that the crux of autocritography is the telling, re-telling, and interpretation of stories (A. Johnson, 2017), I used these assembled stories in two different ways. In the first telling, I wrote my experiences in a first-person prose format such as one would read in a book. In this initial telling

I detailed each of the five events complete with scene setting, dialogue exchanges, and my inner monologues. Then, using a voice recorder, I performed the second tellings as though I was sharing these same stories to a group of master's student affairs students in a classroom or advisory setting. I chose this second format and structure to create distance and distinction between the two tellings. By then comparing and contrasting the two tellings of each of the five events, I was able to analyze both the events themselves as well as the discrepancies in the two methods of storytelling (Awkward, 1999; A. Johnson, 2017).

The five events: The experience outlined in the five events covered a four-month period when the P2P program was called into question and almost cut by upper administrators. In the first event, I described an email exchange with the Academic Advisor (AD) overseeing the entire new student education program of which P2P was one component. In this exchange, I was informed that the university intended to cut P2P. The second event detailed a meeting between myself and upper-level administrators: the AD, a President's Team Member (PTM), and a Senior Administrator (SA), where I shared more information about P2P and was expected to agree to its cessation. In the third event, my supervisors and I attended a meeting with these same upper administrators where we agreed to strong changes to the program. The fourth event described the approval process for the new curriculum. In the fifth and final event, I offered a timeline connecting the three months of these events to both the preceding actions of the university as well as future incidences I saw as directly related to these events.

Analysis: I began data analysis with Saldaña's (2016) dramaturgical coding method which allowed me to both note the interactions and exchanges between participants but also the subtext at play in the stories (Saldaña, 2016). After noting the patterns in the dramaturgical codes, I developed a second round of eight codes tied to my theoretical framework. Finally, by examining the alignment between the dramaturgical and theoretical codes in my third and final review of the tellings, I noted behaviors and descriptions that connected with the practices of idealized objectification and racial gatekeeping both in the descriptions of the tellings and the choices I made in crafting them (A. Johnson, 2014; 2017). During this thematic development stage, I began to see connections between my tellings and my internalized attachment to concepts of reputation.

Summary of findings

Through the thread of reputation, I found six main themes: (a) the everyday subtleties of racist practices, (b) connections between idealized objectification and racial gatekeeping, (c) the great exchange between white men and women, (d) that racism is always occurring, (e) the tension between preserving safety and seeking freedom, and (f) the everyday barriers to People of Color in higher education. Each of these findings tie not only to the data but to the initial questions and theoretical underpinnings of the study.

As a child I internalized many messages about my race and gender. One common message was the phrase ‘all a woman has in this world is her reputation.’ This theme had a deep and lasting impact on how I saw myself, how I engaged with others, and how I positioned myself in the world. In my tellings and my analysis I kept returning to the concept of reputation. As I speak of it, reputation is how someone is externally perceived or interpreted based upon an assessment of their beliefs, actions, and values. Throughout my analysis I noted my repeated attempts to preserve and protect that reputation. Positioning this concept at the center of my analysis process, I developed a conceptual organizer (Figure 1) to depict the relationships between what assumptions, tactics, and actions I took to protect myself, while upholding racism as well as how the university supported and encouraged me in my practices.

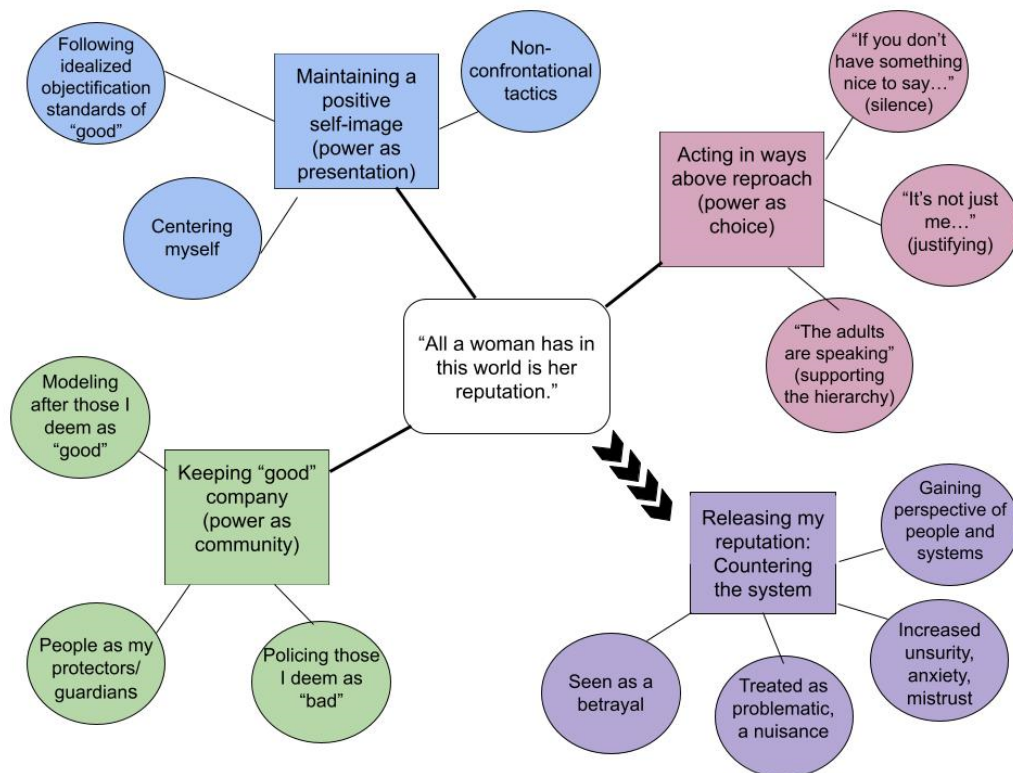


Figure 1: Concept mapping

Everyday subtleties

Though the events and analysis in this study felt deeply personal and radical to me, I realize that much of what occurred is, in fact, mundane. None of these communications would go viral. Nothing I told here would likely lead to anyone losing their job or even being censured for their behavior. Everything described occurred within the bounds of the rules and procedures of a higher education workplace. It is the commonplace nature of this study, however, that makes it more meaningful.

A large portion of my findings focused on the subtleties of communication and interaction with others. In some places, I noted how I used my emotional and physical responses to support a white supremacist system. Stifling my voice, adjusting my tone, and controlling my physical movements during meetings with upper administrators helped me maintain an image of myself as someone who did not challenge the status quo, who supported the system as it played out. By placing my reputation and corresponding (self-)image above the program I was advocating for as well as the needs of my colleagues, I buttressed the problematic practices already in place.

Manipulating norms: shields, weapons, and doing nothing

These ingrained, everyday subtleties are often so normalized that they are easy to ignore (Bondi, 2012; Tatum, 2013). I connect these occurrences to the behavioral legacies I have inherited from white women throughout history. These legacies set the stage for the normalized practices that I and others manipulated to maintain white supremacy throughout every email and meeting. Just like the white women I examined throughout history, I used my gender subordination as a shield and a weapon in order to secure some modicum of power guaranteed by my race. And, in doing so, I was actively complicit in the same issues I advocate against every day.

I adhered to the idealized standards of ‘goodness’ ingrained in me in that I was determined to go along to get along (Gillespie et al., 2002). My emotions were center stage in my tellings. In fact, emotive codes were by far my most strongly used throughout the coding process. I detailed my unease, my frustrations, my fears. In doing so, I made everything about me rather than my program or students. This individual focus is an inherently white practice (Ahmed, 2007; Frankenberg, 1996). One that allows me to focus on my own wants and needs rather than consider the community around me. In doing so, I advocate for myself first, leaving the rest to sort themselves out.

I also hid behind my naivety. The truth is, I should have done better in my actions because I knew better. Anti-racist work was not new for me at the time, and the dissonance I felt and expressed throughout the study revealed the level of awareness I had of the events. However, one of the key shields for white women, and only white women, is our innocence, our naivety. Emotionally, I leaned towards shock and confusion. Verbally, I preferred clarification questions over declarative statements. Each of these actions enabled me to seem innocent, potentially garnering me pity and protection from those around me. And each step towards ignorance was one step away from accountability and action.

I positioned myself as meek and mild at almost every turn, investing wholeheartedly in that escape route reserved solely for white women (Collins, 1990; Daniel, 2019). Physically, I often made myself smaller by hunching my shoulders, tightening my arms to my body, or sitting lower in my chair. I focused on controlling my body movements and facial expressions so that no one would take notice of my conflicting emotions. In doing so, I avoided direct conflict and confrontation. I was able to maintain a space at the table with the administrators because I did not push back. Instead, my meekness enabled the flow of racism to continue undeterred.

One of my strongest weapons were the various elements over which I held control. I controlled the goodness of those around me in how I relayed my story. Given that white women are often the evaluators of what behaviors are ‘good’ or

‘appropriate’ (Daniel, 2019; Ozias, 2017), I used that weapon to cast different characters in positive and negative lights. Because I did not care for their persistent interruptions and communication style, I used negative descriptions and exasperated body language to write the Academic Advisor (AD) as ‘bad’. When the President’s Team Member (PTM) refused to look at my materials and used combative responses, I denied their credibility through my internal monologue. The Senior Administrator (SA) ceased to be impressed with me and, instead, decided to cut my program, so I used devaluing descriptors to capture their body language and word choice. My supervisors, however, retained my good favor throughout the events. Every mention of them included their kind expressions, empowering body language, and welcoming demeanors. They chose to be good to me, so I gave them positive assessments and continued loyalty.

I also controlled who was at the table. My first and most prominent moment of defiance in these events occurred when I advocated for my supervisors to be brought into the space before decisions were made. This moment, though a turning point in my reputation as a ‘good’ woman, was also a demonstration of power. By advocating for the involvement of those not present, I indicated that our conversation was inappropriate. Even though I invited them more for my own sense of security than concern for the correct process in decision-making, the action still served as a flex of power. As people in far superior positions, they could have easily denied me and moved forward without my supervisors’ input. However, the administrators decided instead to go along with my suggestion, indicating that I had some foothold of decision-making power in that space.

My inaction was also an action. The flow of white supremacy and specific racist practices was so strong that, to maintain my positions of power, I merely had to do and say nothing (Tatum, 2013). There were several times throughout the events where I chose to swallow my inner thoughts rather than speak them. For example, then I noticed that the white SA refused to look my supervisors, two Black women, in the eye, I said nothing. I chose to literally look away from the occurrence rather than name it. In these moments, there was a risk analysis occurring where I had to decide whether it was more important to name the problematic practices at play, or keep my mouth shut and maintain a spot at the table. And the keeping my mouth shut part came with far less emotional turmoil and much more credibility in the space.

The great exchange

Each of these examples outline the greatest unspoken exchange for white women: loyalty and obedience to white men in exchange for protection and a sliver of power (Daniel, 2019). Because we do not stand on solid ground in terms of social power

due to our gender subordination, we need to be granted access to that power. White men, and the programs and institutions that center around their wants, needs, and wishes, offer white women more positions of authority and spots at the table, but we must always work to support their institutions if we want to maintain that access. This exchange was never clearer to me than in the AD's final response to the events that took place. Following the second meeting I had with administrators, the AD emailed both assessing the meeting as well as evaluating my and my supervisors' actions.

I want you to understand that I think what your former supervisor started, and what you've continued, has value. But it was a big experiment. I think we've learned that it is not right for our population as a **mandatory** activity. I realize that the natural inclination is to argue the value of continuing with no change. 'Students are philistines, they just don't get it.' If it was my program I'd probably do the same. I don't fault you for that, but it's time for us to join together... I'd happily trade your hour on identity for an hour on financial health. If I had the power as instructor to make that change I'd do it immediately. I'm sorry that this transition seems so antagonistic. If [your supervisor's] eyes had been nail guns I'd be a bleeding corpse right now. From my perspective I think the meeting failed. I was hoping that when the [SA] and [PTM] said we need to move another direction that your response would be 'I'm happy to do that.' (Event 3:1, p. 6).

Clearly, I failed in their estimation. Because I did not jump in line, I was a disappointment. Because I worked to maintain the program in its original form, I failed. But mostly, because I sided with my supervisors, one of whom they named as a threat, I lost my good standing in their estimation. By not happily obliging the administrators' wishes I caused a serious disruption in the system and, in doing so, jeopardized my reputation as a 'good' white woman.

The truth is white women's power is tenuous at best (Lorde, 1984). While we do have higher and more frequent access to systems than other marginalized populations (H. L. Johnson, 2017; Pritchard & McChesney, 2018) and exist in a system designed to insulate and protect us (Daniel, 2019), that access and protection comes at a serious price. Any step outside of the expectations of those in power, jeopardizes our protection and limits our access. Any choice to pursue our own wants, wishes, or needs puts us at risk of exposing this arrangement. And to defy this agreement leaves us vulnerable. This email, for me, served as a reminder of the fragility of this relationship.

Racism at all times

This exchange for power only succeeds because systems of white supremacy exist at all times, no matter who is in the room. In fact, given the way white people conceptualize society around our own ways of thinking, being, and knowing, systems are designed with white people's expectations imbedded into everything that we do (Picca & Feagin, 2007). This frame of seeing the world means that inter-racial spaces are not a required setting for racism to occur (Picca & Feagin, 2007). In fact, insulated spaces such as meeting rooms with only white people present, are perfect places for white supremacist systems to flourish. This became glaringly apparent for me throughout the course of these events.

One of the underlying truths throughout all of these events is that, as an entry-level employee in a strongly hierarchical organization, I should not have been the only person in the room representing this program. My supervisors, two women with many more years' experience, more degrees, and more direct access to upper administrators should have been notified first that there was an issue with this program. However, they were left unaware until I decided to grant them access.

And when my supervisors were in the space, they were treated remarkably differently. In my first meeting, composed entirely of white identified people, the administrators' mannerisms and verbal exchanges denoted mainly condescension and pity. In our second meeting, however, which included two Black identified women, there was a shift in inflection and body language from the PTM and AD that created tension for all of us. They both jumped in and out of the conversation, talking over my supervisors, leaning intimidatingly into the table, and smacking the tabletop while they spoke. As they realized we were a unified front ready to present reasoned and theoretically-based arguments, their responses became more emotionally driven. The reasoned arguments gave way to what they felt or believed to be true as opposed to what they knew. My supervisors' presence began to reveal 'white lies, maneuvers, and pathologies that contribute to the avoidance of a critical understanding of race and racism' (Leonardo, 2004, p. 141). Rather than change their stances or begin a more collaborative-style conversation with the two Black women before them, the white administrators only became more emotional and forceful in their responses.

Entrenchment of white supremacy must continually be brought to the forefront wherever white people are (Frankenberg, 1996; hooks, 1989). By this, I do not mean to center whiteness or the needs of white people (Ahmed, 2007). Rather, white people must design our work and lives intentionally in ways that keep our whiteness and its associated privileges and access from being overlooked or forgotten (Ahmed, 2007). By keeping the curtain pulled back, systems of white

supremacy are more likely to be surfaced and disrupted. It should not be dependent upon the presence of POC to reveal the problematic practices of white people.

Leaving safety, seeking freedom

Operating in a more accountable system as a white woman means that we cannot continue to maintain our reputed ‘goodness’ if we want to stand in solidarity with WOC specifically and POC in general. If my goal is to amplify the voices and issues of marginalized populations, I cannot continue to buy in to systems that support the needs and wants of white men above everyone else. And with change there is both a sense of loss and the potential for deep and meaningful gains.

If white femininity feeds into this agreement that I trade my sense of safety for obedience (Collins, 1990; Lorde, 1984), then when white women choose to work against the institutions that support them, they reveal this unspoken contract and threaten its conditions. This disobedience comes with its own form of punishment: questioning, scrutiny, and removal of access to name a few.

My fourth event spoke to the loss that comes from turning against the unspoken agreement of protection that I have with white men and their systems and institutions. For what was one of the first times in my professional career I realized how tenuous my relationship with higher education is and how easy it is to step out of favor. I became paranoid of my work and found myself unwilling and unable to trust my own judgment. Instead, I was constantly seeking advice and support before making any decision. In advocating against the wishes of these administrators, I forfeited my comfort. Though I do not wish to aggrandize white women’s feelings here, I would be remiss if I did not take a moment to speak to the loss I experienced. In my life I have always found that change, even exciting change, comes with a sense of loss and even a period of mourning. This experience was no different.

If I only looked at myself from a deficit perspective, as someone in need of the protection of white men and their institutions, I would never find the incentive to violate this unspoken agreement again. The weight of my disobedience still sits with me today. However, if I decenter my own needs and the systems of white supremacy, there are benefits to disobedience. The system that white women buy into, one of security in exchange for loyalty and obedience, works mainly to keep us separate from other groups also harmed by white supremacy (Lorde, 1984).

In the end, it was not my sense of virtue or some noble white savior-oriented feeling that encouraged me to push back against the administrators. Instead, it was my relationship with my supervisors which was far more genuine and worth protecting than maintaining my reputation with the administrators as a ‘good’ white woman. The secret is that, when we choose the side of liberation that Women of Color have been advocating for throughout history, we open ourselves up to deeper

relationships, stronger partnerships, and more sustainable work (Dace, 2012). If we can let go of our ingrained racism that stems from our need for protection, our inherited legacies of ‘goodness,’ and our aspirations of power, we make space for the self-work necessary to stand shoulder to shoulder with Women of Color.

Examining barriers from the inside

Finally, I examined the continued discrimination of Women of Color, particularly Black women, in higher education spaces. I offer this finding as continued evidence of a glaring issue but from a somewhat different vantage point: an insider’s perspective. As a person in the room to which two Black women were not invited and were treated poorly when they were finally granted entrance, I witnessed and participated in this discriminatory practice from a different angle.

White women must speak up regarding the oppression we witness, even when we are participants in the moment. It is not enough to do private sidebars after the fact (Dace, 2012). Rather, we must speak up in the moment or, better yet, before the moment can come to pass. I did not initially request my supervisors be brought into the conversation for their benefit, but rather my own. My concern in that moment was not for their experience in a white supremacist system denying them access to power and decision-making capabilities. I was focused on me, on my comfort. My choice to advocate for their presence, though self-focused, still ruptured the white supremacist bubble we had entered together. The effect on the administrators appeared to be confusion and annoyance, on me it was freeing. White women must fully acknowledge the power we have in spaces like these. Our perceived ‘goodness’ means we are heard in ways that Women of Color are not. It is our responsibility to address this before, during, and after in public and prominent ways. Only in leveraging the power that we have can we be the accomplices we are called to be (Collins, 1990).

Implications

To dive into the connections between this work and different areas of higher education, I crafted three different artifacts: (a) a case study, (b) a response email to a faculty member, and (c) a twitter thread. Each of these artifacts suggest ways to and examples of disrupting and interrupting the white supremacist higher education system while also reimagining how I operate and position myself as a white woman in this system.

Disrupting

This study highlights ways that white supremacy is maintained and advanced specifically within, through, and by white women. I crafted a case study (Appendix A) as a means of surfacing the gendered racist practices white women use in these everyday spaces to maintain power and control. This case includes many examples of the behaviors I practiced myself throughout these events. These behaviors include a white woman staff member: a) protecting her reputation as a ‘good’ white woman by appearing non-confrontational, b) policing how best to navigate through the hiring process, and c) using her emotions as a shield to protect against analyzing her bias as well as a weapon to force the two Women of Color to stop questioning her authority. This case study also sheds light on the roles other members of the committee play in supporting and protecting this white woman in her behaviors. I offer this as a self-analysis tool as well as an opportunity for a committee or team to begin discussions about these particular actions and how they appear in their own environments.

Interrupting

I crafted an email response (Appendix B) to illustrate what interruption could look like. As part of the data collection and analysis, I highlighted in detail an email I received from the Academic Advisor (AD) following our second meeting with administrators. In my crafted response I wanted to interrupt their narrative with a counter perspective that both held true to the facts while also being purposeful, direct, and free of my gendered racist practices such as subjecting to their authority or minimizing myself and my experiences for their benefit. In doing so, I hoped to show the power of directness and intentionality when naming problematic behaviors. My response here was so different than any of my previous interactions with this person. I was able to advocate for my program, my students, my colleagues, and myself in a way that could not be ignored or misconstrued.

Interrupting takes time and practice. The process of writing it was, in a way, extremely cathartic. It also helped me practice a new way of communicating that I will continue to utilize in the future. I would encourage this process for anyone seeking to determine how best to respond in situations like this. Draft it out, take some space away, and re-read it. By doing this, I was able to trim down the pieces where I worried more about protecting myself than saying what needed to be said. Now that I know how I exhibit these behaviors I can catch and interrupt them sooner.

Reimagining

Examining my own racism as a white woman opened levels of inherited and ingrained racist practices I had yet to understand or investigate. In doing so, I came face to face with many facets of my problematic ways of being that were difficult to address. But the process of doing so aided far more than harmed. This self-scrutiny, the action of unearthing and reconciling with intentionally avoided areas of my life, is one that I highly recommend for all white women. Taking up the call to know ourselves (Collins, 1990; Combahee River Collective, 1977/2015) and to address our behaviors and beliefs is one that I will never finish. Rather, it is now a life-long endeavor, one that will shift and sway throughout my life. I know I will never eradicate racism from my being. But rather, I will ‘recognize and continue looking rather than turn away’ (Frankenberg, 1996, p. 14). I commit and recommit every day to actively investigate my actions and beliefs before, during, and after they occur to continue on the journey of Anti-racist work.

The process of life-long examination is one I hope to do in community. This study can serve as a potential guide both for myself and for other white women who are interested in doing similar work in their own lives. Whiteness operates and thrives on the myth that white people are individuals, completely separate from each other (Garner, 2007). Though we must forfeit our comforts as white women in order to make sustainable change, we do not have to do so in isolation. So, to build a community of self-examination, accountability, and change, I crafted a twitter thread (Appendix C). This thread is an instigator, a piece to name directly what my research says and what the literature has already found. By putting it out there in this informal format, more people in and outside of higher education can engage with it and apply it to their own lives and experiences.

Further Implications and Research

This study also offers ways to help students both in and outside of the classroom. Given the acceptance, attendance, and graduation numbers of white women at their higher education institutions it is probable that these racial gatekeeping practices nuanced through their idealized objectification are occurring wherever they are present. As educators, advisors, and mentors we must stop supporting students in these practices. Continuing the narrative that white women are innocent, naïve, and unable to handle conflict only furthers harmful learning environments for Students of Color where they are continually demoralized, devalued, and pushed aside for the comfort of white students. Doing so also inhibits white women students from fully knowing themselves, their place in the world, and their potential as changemakers.

In terms of research, this study's frame of intersectionality, racial gatekeeping, and idealized objectification provide a tool for examining white women's gendered racism both in and outside of higher education. Using this framework, future studies could look at experiences of individual white women in various areas of higher education, as well as potential group studies. It could also serve as a model for developing frameworks across many different subordinated and dominant identity intersections. Finally, autocritography is a powerful methodological tool that can be wider utilized in both this content area and many more.

Conclusion

If autoethnography requires that we emerge from our study as different people (Ellis, 2004), I would say I met this criterion. Doing this study, and doing it within the context of 2020, has made clear to me that the things I worry about like my reputation, mean nothing in the end (Lorde, 1984). What matters instead are the communities I create, the ones I work to preserve, and the stories I choose to tell. I am a white woman doing social justice work in a space designed to protect and insulate me. I can either choose to invest in those spaces as they are in order to maintain my own comfort or I can disrupt it with my words, my body, my actions. The privilege of that choice is no longer lost on me. And 'I am not free while any woman is unfree, even when her shackles are very different from my own. And I am not free as long as one Person of Color remains chained. Nor is anyone of you' (Lorde, 1984, p. 132).

Author biographies

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Appendix A. Implications Artifact: A Search Committee Case Study

You have been asked to serve on the search committee for the Associate Director of Leadership and Service Learning at Southeastern University with six other people:

- Committee Chair: Caitlin, Director for Fraternity and Sorority Life (a white woman)
- Amber, Associate Director for Student Engagement (a white woman)
- Sandra, Associate Director for Minority Access Programs (a Latina woman)
- Dan, Community Director for one of the Residential Communities (a white man)
- Beth, Community Director for one of the Residential Communities (a white woman)
- Lori, Graduate Assistant for Leadership (a Black woman)

This position is part of a restructuring of the student activities department with leadership and service learning being burgeoning areas of growth for the unit. The person selected will report to the Director for Student Life (a white man).

Throughout the resume review process, you notice a pattern from some of your peers. The three members who identify as white women habitually make statements regarding the applicants' related experiences often dependent upon what experiences are being described. When the applicants describe service-related experiences within Communities of Color, these experiences are not evaluated as highly as those who serve predominantly white-serving communities or programs. After experiencing this discrepancy for several applicants, Sandra names this for the group, asking the committee chair, Caitlin, to explain why these are being rated differently despite them both describing service-related experiences. Caitlin has difficulty forming words but eventually says that the situations 'do not seem to have the same level of intensity. This applicant helped make some lunches for a backpack program for an inner city, school which is great. But this applicant actually worked with her sorority with kids in a local hospital. To me they seem different.' Sandra informed Caitlin that the first applicant was also serving with their greek organization, one associated with AAPI communities. At this, Caitlin becomes quiet and refuses to make eye contact with Sandra for the rest of the meeting.

Following the meeting, Caitlin sends an email detailing the importance of committee members working through their assessments and evaluations as they see fit. She notes that, this stage in the search process is meant to be only review and there are more opportunities to advocate for certain candidates as the field is

narrowed. Sandra replies all to this email advocating for collaborative discussions in all stages of the review process. She points out that, it is only through group conversations that the committee can identify places where they are potentially practicing bias or overlooking a potential candidate. Lori, the student representative on the committee, replies all as well sharing support for Sandra's recommendations.

At the next committee meeting, you enter a few minutes late to a somewhat tense-feeling space. Caitlin and Sandra are engaged in a back and forth regarding the appropriate ways to handle the review process. Lori is offering support for Sandra's perspective whereas everyone else in the room is silent. After a few minutes Caitlin throws up her hands and says 'what do you want me to do here? I'm just doing what the Director asked of me! It's like you think I'm the bad guy for trying to make this easier!' Caitlin then becomes quiet and clearly emotionally impacted. Amber, Dan, and Beth all offer supportive comments to help Caitlin feel better. Dan suggests that the group try things as Caitlin is recommending to reach the selection deadline.

Caitlin then turns to you and asks, 'What do you think about all of this?'

Questions:

- What issues are there related to race? Gender?
- How could socialization practices of race and gender be playing out simultaneously?
- How do Caitlin's actions align with socialized expectations and historical narratives of white women?
- What influence do these issues have in this search process?
- How could you as a white woman intervene?

Appendix B. Implications Artifact: An Email Response

AD,

After reviewing your email, I have some reactions. Firstly, this ‘experiment’ is a university-wide mandate, not an optional elective or special topics course. Diversity work comes with dissonance so the complaints you shared reflect what we expect. The students are doing exactly what they are supposed to do when we ask them to have these conversations. So, instead of backing away, we should assist them in navigating this dissonance.

This program provides students with necessary skills of conflict management and working with diverse people. Students would have a better chance to learn these skills if we took time to stress the importance of these lessons and prioritized this learning. Fully understanding, supporting, and advocating for this program would be a significant step forward so that, when critiques surface, upper administrators like you who were able to articulate the importance of conflict, critical reasoning, and diverse experiences.

You seem to significantly underestimate the work students are willing to put into this. We claim to have the best students in the nation, yet we assume they can’t or won’t try new things or meet new challenges when they focus on diversity and inclusion. Instead of these assumptions, let’s set them up for the success they are more than capable of achieving; we prepare them, support them, and model for them how to thrive in diverse spaces and take in difficult information.

This process appears antagonistic because it is antagonistic. Instead of being clear in your communication, relaying necessary information, and inviting me and my team to the table sooner, we were left in the dark. We ask our students to model respect, integrity, and honesty, yet these were not offered to us.

In the future, please think about the way you conceptualize me and my supervisors. Asking me to stand in their place, making wide sweeping decisions including potentially cutting a \$20,000 program impacting 4,000+ people was out of line. At no other place in our organizational structure at this university would an entry level employee be asked to make such a decision when their supervisors were not included or even aware of the situation. My supervisors, two Women of Color, were avoided and overlooked despite their roles and responsibilities. This should not occur. Also, Angela was not and is not a threat to you. She has no control over you or what you do, therefore your perceptions of her reveal more about you than they do about her.

And me? I refuse to fall in line here. My job as a Social Justice Educator is to push Southeastern to do better, to be better. I will continue to critique this university so we can acknowledge our narrow fields of focus and the harms they cause. My hope is that you will recognize this moving forward. We all can benefit from learning, growth, and change. Perhaps the real experiment here was to witness how a university could rise to its own challenge of requiring students to navigate conflict and diverse conversations. I will leave it to you to assess the results.

Sincerely,

Becky Morgan

Appendix C. Implications Artifact: A Twitter Thread

[The thread was posted on Month, Day, Year by @...]

Dear white cis-women (1/15): Before you scroll past naming reasons this won't apply to you, before you roll your eyes & shift your shoulders, before you peruse my other tweets to decide if I am someone worth listening to, stop. Breathe. Now let's chat.

First: We (you & me) DO have power but won't admit it. That'd be bossy or bitchy. We purposefully wield it but never own it. That'd be calculating or bitchy. We look innocent while harming others (re: BIPOC) but we'll never name it. That'd be terrible &, yep, bitchy. (2/15)

So let me say it for us: we are Beckys, Karens, and Amy Coopers. I don't care about your ally badges, the number of BIPOC around you, or your philanthropy. Each of us are complicit. And our survival depends on setting ourselves apart from and above BIPOC. Mine too. (3/15)

Historically we come from a long line of white cis women who taught us three things:

1. innocence always to avoid accountability
2. we are the example of good & moral & we evaluate others
3. we cannot survive without the safety & protection of white men (4/15)

But I don't do those things! That's not me! So let me ask you this:

1. have you ever avoided or deflected a conversation about race by focusing on all your good traits and actions or how much you just don't notice things like race? (5/15)
2. have you ever compared yourself to other white women or white men to show how much better you are than them? Or talked about how the people who challenge you (most often BIPOC) are just being too harsh or too mean? (6/15)
3. have you ever stood in defense of white men because they're probably just misunderstood, good people underneath, and/or they were just 'having a hard day'? (7/15)

We call the police, we evaluate our coworkers to our bosses, we wield our emotions as weapons. BIPOC are literally dying because of our maintenance of these norms and expectations. (8/15)

Breathe. These practices aren't just about you. It's how we are taught to protect our white privilege. It's a combo only for us and it gets us through racial justice minefields without ever touching the ground. (9/15)

We must be innocent, good, & obedient & there are dire consequences when we aren't. Many of us have stories of what happens when we don't follow the rules. But we've also hid behind them to avoid our racism. & they are keeping us from standing in solidarity with BIPOC. (10/15)

Friends, this is not judgment but rather invitation. I'm not separate from this. This is me. But I want to say it loud and clear for the people in the back and as a reminder of what Audre Lorde already told us, these practices will not save us. (11/15)

By continuing this way, we further harm to BIPOC & add to our own oppression. We cannot continue to maintain these norms of 'good white women' if we truly wish to disrupt and dismantle white supremacy. (12/15)

So now take a review of your spaces. Who talks and who doesn't? Who do we speak well of/dismiss? Why is that? What judgements do we make about others? Who do we follow/cancel? What are we really sacrificing? What is fear of disapproval compared to fear of death? (13/15)

So read up on white fragility AND Authors of Color that make you uncomfortable. Share the article AND talk about it with your people. Send money to big orgs AND invest in smaller businesses run by BIPOC. Interrupt, intervene, AND push through your inevitable mistakes. (14/15)

SO a TL; DR: white cis-women further white supremacy using the survival tools ingrained in us through our oppression as women. When confronted: we get defensive, avoid, & lash out. But we can't continue if we want actual change. So, stop. Breathe. Now try something new. (15/15)