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Work in Progress

Outside the Circle? The Relational Implications for White Women Working Against Racism

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Work in Progress

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Abstract

What leads White women to speak up against racism, an action which threatens their own racial privilege? What are the relational implications of doing so? Based on interviews with eight White women educators who are have assumed positions of leadership in their school districts as part of an anti-racist initiative, this paper explores the relational origins of their activism and its implications for their own relational growth and development.

Several years ago we read *Outside the Magic Circle* (Barnard, 1985), the autobiography of Virginia Foster Durr, a Southern White woman, born in 1905, who spent most of her adult life working for social justice in the South. She described her early life as one of great privilege and of pervasive racism, a world of Black servants and assumed White superiority. She was raised to be a “Southern belle.” But when as an adult she began speaking up about racism, she quickly found that she had stepped “outside the magic circle.” Despite many social and economic pressures to step back into the circle of privilege, she and her husband, Clifford Durr, continued their civil rights work throughout their lives.

What leads people like Virginia Foster Durr and others to step outside the circle? What are the relational implications of doing so? How do they maintain their stance on the margins of society with those who are oppressed? As has been discussed elsewhere (Tatum, 1994), the stories of White women and men who have chosen to actively interrupt racism and stand in solidarity with oppressed people are not well known. Yet, Beverly, as an anti-racist educator teaching students about the psychology of racism, has found that her students, most of whom are White women, are desperately in need of examples.

As they become aware of the still pervasive racism in our society, they are often moved to act against it. They struggle with their own fears about stepping outside the circle of White privilege and search for role models who might show them how it is done. When Beverly invites a White activist to speak to her class about her own personal journey toward an awareness of racism and her development as a White ally, the questions students most often ask clearly reflect relational concerns. “Did you lose friends when you started to speak up?” “How do you

deal with your relatives when they make racist remarks?" "My boyfriend is so prejudiced! What can I do?" Their anxiety about the potential for social isolation is apparent. The students seem to feel that they are standing on the edge of the wilderness, and there is great fear about being out there alone. The voices of those who are already out there blazing the trail need amplification.

It is clear that these students need to have the lives of White people who are working against racism made more visible, and the relational implications of that work need to be examined. It is this examination that is the focus of this paper.

Setting the context

The eight White women whose lives we will be discussing have several things in common. They are all experienced public school educators, ranging in age from 37 to 55. The predominantly White suburban districts they represent are all located in the greater Boston area. These school districts are all participating in the METCO program, a voluntary desegregation program which brings Boston students of color, most of whom are African-American, to their schools. All of the women were participants in a pilot professional development course sponsored by their school districts which focused on issues of race and racism in schools.

Following the completion of the 54-hour course, in the spring of 1994, all course participants were offered the opportunity to receive additional training and support to assume a leadership role in their districts, working with other faculty and staff as anti-racist peer educators. These eight White women, along with two women of color and two White men, volunteered to become "district trainers."

After a four-day training workshop which took place in the summer of 1994, the district trainers planned and implemented various kinds of anti-racist activities (mini-courses, study groups, parent workshops) in their districts during the 1994-95 school year. They also had the opportunity to meet bi-monthly after school to talk with each other about what they were doing, sharing ideas and problem-solving as necessary.

During this time, Beverly was one of the instructors for the professional development course and the four-day training workshop. She also facilitated the district trainer support group meetings. During those meetings, she was often struck by how

often the White trainers talked about feeling "out on a limb" with their colleagues. As they became more identified with an anti-racist perspective, some colleagues sought them out for advice about racial issues, but others seemed to now view them with some suspicion. These White women seemed to be describing the kind of social pressure identified by Helms (1990) as common when White racial awareness increases and anti-racist action is initiated.¹

We became increasingly interested in knowing more about how their relationships with family, friends and colleagues were being impacted by their anti-racist work. We collaborated to develop an interview guide for use with the White district trainers. Elizabeth, then a graduate student in psychology and education, conducted the individual interviews, and we have been working together to analyze the data in terms of the relational themes. Data from the interviews with the eight White women will be presented here. We will first provide a description of some of their experiences and then discuss the implications of those experiences for relational theory. All names used to refer to the participants are pseudonyms.

Relational roots of an anti-racist identity

The personal histories of the eight women are varied. Most grew up in predominantly White suburban or rural communities, but two were raised in racially-mixed urban settings. While one woman described her family as "very conservative" and two others related clear examples of parental racism, the five remaining women described having at least one liberal parent who modeled openness to other cultures and respect for racial differences. In some cases, religious messages about equality, fairness, and compassion for others were also important early influences. Yet for all, their limited contact with people of color contributed to a very naive understanding of racial issues until adulthood.

It was in their college years or later that they had educational and/or social experiences which heightened their awareness. For example, Anna said:

I went to a [weekend] workshop on racism when I was 20, in college. And that had a very powerful effect . . . I really remember so much about that, even now I could quote some things that were said there . . . I really realized in a big way that we had to make up

for wrongs that weren't our fault but that our society still had problems with.

For Wendy, it was in the context of her relationship with a Black college roommate that she first became aware of race. Olivia dated interracially and in so doing became the target of racial insults herself. As young wives and mothers, Jackie and Rachel both had the experience of living in Southern states and observing the legacy of segregation firsthand. Said Rachel:

A lot of the experiences I had I think really kind of angered me and made me feel peculiar, uncomfortable. And I think that dissonance really kind of got me going, but I didn't know what to do with it; I didn't know where to go.

For these women, the opportunity to develop relationships with people of color in their workplace also became critical to their understanding. Six of the eight women specifically mentioned a relationship with an African-American colleague as significant. Martha and Jackie both described relationships with Black female colleagues, in particular:

She's really enabled me to talk very frankly. . . . I hope she never feels like I'm asking her questions as a representative, but as herself. That's been a very special relationship.

I [feel] very close to her. This was my first really close relationship with an African-American woman and I've really learned a lot about how difficult her life has been and many other people's that I know. And so I've had a heightened awareness, but I knew that I needed to learn more about racism. And I was drawn to it when I was asked to take the course; I was really drawn to it like a magnet.

For Anna it was relationships with African-American students that were transformative:

Always my biggest challenges were Black students . . . I may not have been able to articulate it at the time, but when people push enough of those buttons or something, there's something to it. There's something more to it . . . you have to really look inside and see what it is they stir up in you. . . .

And so the more I got into situations like that, what I did was I started traveling. And I got very curious about what I didn't know. I would go to Washington, I went to San Francisco . . . I put myself in situations

deliberately to acquire more base information . . . I felt like I was working on several tracks at once: you know, the personal track of where was I coming from, what was my own history with matters of race, what was my own experience being around people different from me, getting . . . an educational piece, and then the work with teachers . . . is like a whole other thing.

For all of the women, these experiences in their early adulthood had opened the door to the exploration of race, but they varied in the degree to which they had stepped through that opening.

Breaking the silence: Talking about race

Though the roots of their anti-racist perspective were in place before the professional development course was made available to them, their involvement in the anti-racist initiative provided an opportunity to travel further. It allowed them to deepen their knowledge, provided a framework for understanding some of their previous experiences, and encouraged them to act on that understanding. Feeling a new freedom to talk about racism was empowering. Said Anna:

I didn't always have the language for dealing with it. You know, I knew it; I could see it, I could tell you that I've seen it here, you know, numbers of times . . . Being the Diversity chair, I would keep bringing the same issues to the table: how are we going to move the curriculum; how are we going to get people educated; how are we going to . . . get people to adjust to the real issues that happen. And people would bring issues that happened in the school to the table and scratch their heads. Like even sometimes at the Diversity meetings, people would really, like they'd say racist things right at the table! And you know, sometimes we had to address them right then and there and say, "Well, let's back up." You know, oh, it was terrible . . . You can get as educated as you want, but if you haven't talked about racism, it doesn't really . . . I mean, you gotta factor that in, big time.

Martha also felt strengthened to talk freely about racial issues and is now better able to advocate effectively for the needs of Boston students as a result: It's given me a vocabulary in some way, even though it's not a new vocabulary, to talk to

teachers about Boston kids in their classrooms . . . it's a discussion I never was comfortable enough to have. I mean I think I did with people I really knew, but [now] I'll have that with anybody; I'll take anyone on (laughs).

To Olivia, breaking the silence is what anti-racism is about, "having the conversation":

I'm interested in talking about race and racism and there's not a lot of White people who talk about race, you know. That's not something Whites talk about because they are part of the dominant culture. They don't see their Whiteness . . . I should say WE, not they, we don't see it . . . It's invisible to us. I'm interested in making it not invisible anymore.

. . . The thing that's happened for me is that I'm no longer afraid to bring [race] up. I look to bring it up; I love bringing it up.

As a district trainer, Olivia brings it up regularly with her colleagues, and they, like she, seem to feel liberated by the opportunity. Describing a discussion group in which participants talked about racial issues, she said:

It was such a rich conversation and it just flowed the whole time. It was exciting to be a part of it and everybody contributed and everybody had their say. And everybody felt the energy and the desire . . . It was a mixed group, predominantly White with maybe one-third African-American. There was a need for that to talk about what was going on in our own system and our own building.

Sometimes the conversations are one-on-one and more confrontational, as seen in Kathy's example:

There was a colleague that said something about the METCO students, "What do they exactly *add* to this school?" I listened to it once and I made all kinds of, you know, reasons why it was important, and he said it to me again a couple of weeks later, and I was just so irritated, he just wasn't listening. And I said, "Well, that's really White of you, isn't it, to consider them useless," and he walked in his room and didn't come out for like three days to speak to me. But after that, he took the course [on racism] and he started talking about it, I think it really made him think.

Kathy acknowledged that her remark was "not-so-nice" but she said, "I don't think anything else would have worked." Anna agrees that:

Sometimes you have to take stances where people just, I mean, maybe they say, you know, 'the hell with her' when you leave, but maybe they say, 'Whew, I didn't know that.' [Sometimes I think] it kind of just spurted out and maybe I should have framed it a little nicer, but sometimes if you're too nice, people don't get off the dime.

Out on a limb? The relational impact of an anti-racism perspective

Given the freedom they have claimed to speak their truth about racial issues, it is appropriate to ask how their relationships with family, friends and colleagues have been affected. As they have stepped outside the circle, have others stepped with them? Or are they standing alone? In the context of work, most described feeling a remarkable amount of support. Most have worked in their school districts for a long time. Several of the women mentioned the longevity of their collegial relationships as a positive factor in the work that they were trying to do. Their colleagues have come to respect them as sincere, thoughtful individuals who have been leaders in their school communities. In some cases there has also been very strong administrative support which certainly has strengthened the women in their roles. Even when there has been conflict, it seems that an underlying sense of respect has remained between colleagues.

Nevertheless, it is a challenge to know how to educate, and not alienate, a peer on a subject as sensitive as race. The anxiety is apparent in this teacher's comment:

I get really scared at some of the things that come up. And I've never been so nervous in my life as I have been professionally . . . facilitating that anti-racist study group. Believe me, there are people at 99 different levels and there are only 12 people in the room . . . It's unbelievable. And it feels very overwhelming . . . I haven't always been able to figure out what to do because something [someone says] is so bad that it's hard to know how the person will take it. But I have, you know, done it. I've done it with, you know, the gentlest gloves I can find; I mean I don't assault anybody. I think it takes practice to know how to confront those things; you kind of do it and pray and then,

you know, you do and then you do it again, and you do it again and again . . . I honestly feel that I haven't . . . there's nobody that hates my guts yet.

The fact that the professional role of district trainer carries with it a certain degree of administrative support and a formal acknowledgment of one's status as a school leader may help pave the road for these anti-racist educators. This institutional context falls away when dealing with strangers outside of school, and then the task of speaking against racism feels more difficult to some. For example, Kathy commented:

Sometimes in the community it is very hard. At town meeting for example, occasionally you will get someone who will stand up and say things like, 'Well, we can't really afford the METCO program,' or 'Well, what do you mean we need federal funding for housing because those Haitians could move right in here,' which is, I would think, a code word for some kind of racism. That's when it's difficult because normally I wouldn't know those people. . . .

A commitment to interrupting racism inevitably impacts social relationships. There are many social situations when Whites are invited to engage in what Christine Sleeter (1995) calls "White racial bonding", for example, to join in the laughter when an ethnic joke is told, to agree implicitly or explicitly with racist comments about people of color. When Whites refuse to bond in that way, there is a rupture in social expectations. These teachers have begun to experience that as they speak up more often.

Several mentioned interrupting jokes at parties, often to the surprise and dismay of their companions. Rachel described in detail an encounter at a gas station with an attendant who casually used a racial slur to describe two Black men who were passing by. He turned to her and said, "They're just everywhere, you just can't avoid them I guess, even living out [here]." Rachel responded:

I looked at him and I said, 'Well why would you want to avoid that?' And he looked at me like I was crazy. 'Well you know what I mean,' he said. And I said, 'Well, you know, I really, I don't know what you mean; it makes me very uncomfortable to hear you talk like that. Those are two men walking down the street minding their own business . . . I have

to tell you I don't share your view.' And he immediately shut up.

Friendships forged at school around the anti-racist work are especially strong. All of the women commented on the importance of these workplace connections. As Wendy said, "You can't do really difficult work like this without developing tremendous bonds with people because it's so difficult." For Martha, it has allowed her to grow close to an African-American woman in a way she never would have otherwise. She said:

Getting to know [her] has just been a treat . . . she's just a really good friend. It's really nice because there's no way, given the structure of the system, that I would have gotten to know her as a friend; I would have gotten to know her as a colleague, but it's very different than a friend.

When friends don't share their anti-racist perspective, there is a potential for conflict. Olivia is dating a White man who does not understand White privilege in the way she does, yet he is willing to engage with her in dialogue about it, and she remains in relationship with him. Rachel, whose deepened commitment to working against racism is relatively recent, has found that some of her friendships have needed to change. Some friends have grown with her, other relationships have been abandoned. Jackie, too, has relationships in transition. She explained:

I have some friends that I've known for many years that have some pretty, pretty racist attitudes and it really disturbs me. So it's causing some upheaval . . . [Has that been going on for a while?] I would say it's been going on a little bit, but since I took the course it's been going on in a stronger way because my awareness has been heightened. And when you learn something, you become a crusader (chuckles).

Anna is a woman whose anti-racist involvement spans two decades and this fact has been a significant determinant of who she calls her friends. For her, life is too short for it to be otherwise. She explained:

The people that I call my friends are concerned about these issues . . . generally speaking, I don't spend time with people that don't care about the things that I care about. And you know what, I didn't just decide that, it's just the way it is . . . if I were to decide now, I'd say, 'Well, I don't have time for the

bullshit, really' . . . I mean I truly don't . . .
how can I make time for that in my life in a
way. I couldn't.

And my family would be an exception to that. As Anna's statement highlights, we choose our friends, but usually not our family. Perhaps not surprisingly, racism within the family seemed the hardest to confront. As one woman said, "My parents just don't have a clue. They're not gonna have a clue . . . so I don't talk very much about it with them." Another also chooses her battles. She explained:

I don't ask from [people] what I don't think they are capable of giving. My father-in-law is pretty staunch in his [racist] beliefs; I just say, 'I don't want to hear it, I'm not going to talk to you about that.' I don't think at 78 I'm going to change his beliefs and I'm only going to get frustrated and angry at him and, you know, he doesn't have much longer . . . I'd much rather put my energies into my 15 year old who can make a difference.

One woman, raised in a liberal family, is especially pained by the contradictions she now sees between expressed parental attitudes and behaviors:

I feel like my brother is a real racist and there's not much I can do about it. And I feel like my mother condones this from him, and yet she was so significant in my life [because of her openness]. I mean my view of her was that she didn't tolerate this kind of behavior . . . and yet I see her now that my brother is an adult, she just, she doesn't say anything. That grieves me a lot.

For another teacher, race has been a toxic subject in her family for more than thirty years, ever since a brother married interracially. Many members of the family ostracized him, and though the marriage did not last, the alienation between family members still exists. As she said, her brother "draws the line in the sand with the family over that incident." Since taking the anti-racism course and expanding her own understanding of racism, she has been better able to connect with this brother, and has worked as a mediator to heal this family wound.

Racism: A relational barrier

It should not be surprising that anti-racism work might have relational implications. Racism alienates one from both self and others. As Beverly has discussed in earlier Stone Center papers (Tatum, 1993;

Ayvazian & Tatum, 1994), everyday racism, as it manifests itself in our daily interactions, represents empathic failure.

Judith Jordan (1986) has described the power of mutual empathy as a source of growth in relation with others. She writes:

Mutual empathy occurs when two people relate to each other in a context of interest in the other, emotional availability and responsiveness, cognitive appreciation of the wholeness of the other; the intent is to understand. While some mutual empathy involves an acknowledgment of sameness in the other, an appreciation of the differentness of the other's experience is also vital. The movement toward the other's differentness is actually central to growth in relationships and also can provide a powerful sense of validation for both self and other. Growth occurs because as I stretch to match or understand your experience, something new is acknowledged or grows in me.

Racism clearly interferes with this process. When a person discriminates intentionally, or unintentionally acts on the basis of internalized racial stereotypes, the acknowledgment of sameness is diminished. If fear of the "other" has been learned and remains unexamined, the emotional availability needed for empathic response is reduced. Conversely, if one has been raised to be 'color-blind', one's capacity to appreciate the differentness of the other's experience may be impaired. If an individual, in the context of a still race-conscious society, cannot acknowledge the significance of race in her life or the lives of others, it may be impossible to move "toward the other's differentness" in a truly empathic way. The disconnecting effect of such empathic failures on Black women has been discussed in my Stone Center paper, *Racial Identity Development and Relational Theory: The Case of Black Women in White Communities*.

Here we would like to discuss not only the way racism disconnects Whites from people of color, but also the way racism disconnects Whites from themselves. As Jean Baker Miller (1988) has discussed in her paper, *Connections, Disconnections, and Violations*, when we have meaningful experiences, we usually seek to share the experience with someone else. In doing so, we hope to be heard and understood, to feel validated by the other. When we do not feel heard by the person with whom we are

engaged, we feel invalidated. A relational disconnection has taken place. We might try again, persisting in our efforts to be heard, or we may choose to disconnect from that person. If doing so would be too painful, then we may disconnect from that dimension of our experience, in hope of being able to connect with the other person in a different way.

In this context, many Whites in their youth have been encouraged to disconnect from their racial experiences. For example, when White children make racial observations about people of color, they are often silenced by their parents, who feel uncomfortable and unsure about how to respond. They may observe contradictions between parental attitudes and behaviors, or between societal messages about meritocracy and visible inequities, but the social taboo which exists in White society about talking about race makes it difficult for them to process these experiences. In order to prevent chronic discomfort, they may learn to “not notice.”

But in “not noticing” one loses opportunities for greater insight into oneself and one’s own experience. A significant dimension of who one is in the world, one’s Whiteness, remains uninvestigated and perceptions of daily experience are routinely distorted. Privilege goes unnoticed, and all but the most blatant acts of racial bigotry are ignored. “Not noticing” requires energy. Exactly how much energy is used up in this way becomes apparent when the opportunity to explore those silenced perceptions is made available. It is as though a blockage has been removed and energy is released.

According to Jean Baker Miller, when a relationship is growth-producing, it results in five good things: increased zest, a sense of empowerment, greater knowledge, an increased sense of self-worth and a desire for more connection. It is quite striking to see that as Whites begin to explore their racial experiences in a validating setting, there is abundant evidence of these “five good things.”

Listen again to Olivia’s description of a discussion group on racial issues that she facilitated:

It was such a rich conversation and it just flowed the whole time. It was exciting to be a part of it and everybody contributed and everybody had their say. And everybody felt the energy and the desire. . . .

Another woman described the process of sharing the new information she has learned with her adult son,

and said, “There’s a lot of energy that’s going in all sorts of ways—it feels wonderful.” Yet another described her own exploration of racial issues as “renewal at mid-life.” The increased self-knowledge she has experienced is apparent as she says, “I’m continuing to go down the path of discovery for myself about what I think and what I believe and the influences I’ve had in my life . . . it impacts me almost every moment of my waking hours.” These benefits of self-discovery are made available as the silence about racism is broken.

It is important to say that even as good things are generated, the growth process is not necessarily painless, as these teachers know well. Rachel described the early phase of her exploration of racism as “hell”, a state of constant dissonance. And breaking the silence requires courage. Judith Jordan (1990) wrote:

It takes courage to speak up, to be authentic in the presence of unknown others, especially if it puts you at odds with the dominant voice. In such situations, we feel the inner struggle, wishing to keep the connection with a supposedly protective, dominant group but knowing that the cost of this protection is our silence and invalidation. In order to speak up against injustice for a reality that we value, however, we will have to risk these ruptures and count on other connections to sustain us.

Are these women out on a limb? Have they stepped outside the circle? Without a doubt. In one way or another, they all feel the risk. But they have learned that connections to others on the same path can sustain them. Said one:

How do I feel about the fact that I might be influencing large groups of people? Well, in a way, I’m proud of it, I’m scared about it because it puts me out in the forefront, it’s a vulnerable position. I think a lot of people need to do it and sometimes I feel alone, so it’s lonely. That’s why it’s nice to have colleagues that have gone through the course and it’s nice to have the [support] group because we talk about these things. But I would never say I wish I hadn’t gotten involved in it. It’s very important, and I hope to see some positive changes.

And when the changes become visible, there is great satisfaction. You can hear it in Wendy’s voice when she says:

... It fills me with great joy when things happen like happened this morning, you know, when I hear people talking about this in the lunch room or in the hall. I think that bringing it to that level of awareness has got to bring about change. And when I hear kids talking about it, when I hear the kids calling one another on things that are said, it's a tremendous amount of satisfaction.

Like Virginia Foster Durr and many others, these White women have stepped outside the magic circle to make social change. In the process, some relationships have changed, but even more significantly, they have changed themselves. As Rachel says, "I'm not the same person I was. I've really grown, and there's no going back."

Discussion Summary:

A discussion is held after each colloquium presentation. Selected portions of the discussion are summarized here. At this session Drs. Sandra Lawrence, Jean Baker Miller, Janet Surrey, and Ms. Elizabeth Knaplund joined Dr. Tatum in leading the discussion.

Question: I appreciated hearing about these White women who were speaking up about racism. I find that I am often in situations where family members or friends make racist comments and I am really uncomfortable, especially now that I have children. I don't want my children to develop those attitudes. How can I respond?

Tatum: A strategy I share with my students is a strategy called the three F's: felt, found, feel. When you talk to someone who you see as similar to you in some way, you can connect with them in your similarity, but then show him/her how you have moved to another place in your thinking, "I felt that way, I found out this new information, now I feel this way about that issue." You are speaking from an "I" perspective, you are not saying, "Oh, you idiot!" and the person responds less defensively than they might.

Lawrence: In my work with undergraduates and also in my own life, I find that you may not always have those three things worked out; the comments come so quickly. You can say, "I feel really uncomfortable about that, something about that is not true. I don't really have my whole head around it yet, but that's not acceptable." It is hard, though.

Question: Do the women feel supported in their schools?

Tatum: Two of the women worked together in the same building, and everybody on their team now has had some anti-racist professional development so they really feel that there is getting to be a critical mass of people in their building who understand the issues or at least are sympathetic to them. In other cases, people are quite isolated.

Question: What role does guilt play as a motivating factor?

Lawrence: I don't know whether I'd say guilt is a motivating factor, but it is one of the feelings. In my work with White undergraduates and in my own life, finally seeing the race privilege that we have, you do feel guilt. But then what you do with the guilt, that's the next step. Looking at White undergraduates in their racial identity, how they deal with the guilt in terms of moving through the stages, you can see that they're not going to stay with the guilt too long. So what construct are they going to use to make some sense out of it. Sometimes their guilt can be so overbearing that they may blame the victim for the uncomfortable feelings they feel. But if they accept responsibility, "Okay, this has happened. I didn't know before, but I see things differently now, I'm going to change my life, I want to make things better." Then that can help them... Guilt in and of itself is not the primary motivator.

Tatum: I would certainly agree with what Sandy said. I don't know if you are familiar with Janet Helms' model of White racial identity, but she talks about guilt being very prominent in the early stage of White identity development.

One of the things that I was really struck by and didn't really address in this paper is the role of religion or spirituality in terms of people's thinking about the work that they're doing. Several people grew up or were involved in religious communities as children, though all may not be still involved presently (some are). That was certainly a piece of it, in terms of thinking what it means to be a child of God as we all are. One person in particular has a very strong Catholic background and she talked a lot about the idea of sin, that it's such a sin that this is happening.

Knaplund: In addition to that, people who did not necessarily connect with a spiritual or religious tradition talked about religious values that they had internalized in childhood. So when I asked them that

question, they talked about values of fairness and justice.

Question: In Becky Thompson's work on White identity, she has observed that many women working against racism have in their background a history of sexual abuse. Guilt is sometimes a legacy of that kind of childhood history and may influence their anti-racism work. Did you observe a pattern of this kind?

Tatum: I am certainly not aware of that as an issue for any of the women that were interviewed. It wasn't something that we inquired about, and it didn't come up spontaneously. But in response to your question, I was thinking about the experience of being oppressed and that the experience of abuse would allow you to empathize with the experience of being oppressed, providing a point of connection. Generally speaking, I find that there are more White women engaged in anti-racism work than White men, and I think that in part comes from White women's understanding of sexism. But when I meet White men who are engaged in anti-racism work, you usually find some history of oppression, not necessarily sexual abuse, but maybe they grew up Jewish in a largely Christian community, or maybe they are gay and have been oppressed in terms of sexual orientation, or they have a sibling who is gay, or perhaps grew up in a multiracial family. There is usually some connection to oppression in their personal life. So, the experience of being abused and the oppression around that may make you very sensitive to oppression issues. The question you asked about guilt may also be a factor, but I don't have any information about that.

Miller: Along with any oppression, usually there is a silencing. When you think about sexual abuse especially, there's huge silencing; so there can be an understanding of oppression from the perspective of what it means to be so silenced. Then finally being able to speak is such a growth experience, as Beverly discussed in the paper, it may lead people on to do more.

Question: How are these White women working or struggling to unlearn their own racism?

Tatum: In addition to the support group that they come to as part of their role as district trainers, meeting with me, several of the women have been meeting together in a group they call, "Us White Girls." The fact that they are meeting to talk about these issues is one way they are doing it. I think some people are more fully engaged in that process than others.

The concept of White privilege and understanding one's privilege was for many people an idea that was new to them. They were aware of racism and could see other people being targeted but didn't necessarily recognize their own privilege. Since then they have been working with that concept and the other idea that has come from the course is the usefulness of caucus groups. Not everything has to be done interracially. As I mentioned in the paper, some of them talked about the value of the cross-racial friendships they have, wishing there was more opportunity to make others, really feeling a need for that. At the same time, part of the learning for them is that there is work that White people need to do on their own, and I think they all are engaged in that.

Lawrence: It's not that the process has to be complete before you take action. But we can do it in conjunction.

Surrey: I am having this experience while being a White mother of a child of color, learning to be a "mother ally". My daughter is in preschool now, and I am learning to keep raising the issue, asking questions. Sometimes I'm seen as making too much of a big deal about it. You have to deal with your own confusion, not always knowing what to do. But children notice racial differences, and adults are reluctant to talk about it. Sometimes it's what you see not happening that is upsetting, when you see things are not being dealt with, not being talked about.

Tatum: One of the things that has happened not just with these women, but with all the teachers who have taken the course (there are now over 200), is that they are much more comfortable raising issues of race in their classrooms. That's one of the immediate changes we've seen.

Knaplund: One teacher mentioned an example where she was reading a book aloud to the class, and suddenly realized that the book she was reading was very racist. She wondered to herself, "What should I do? Should I finish reading the book? Should we talk about the issue right now?" It seems that more and more people are seeing the issues come up and are doing away with the lesson plan and talking about it right then and there. They are more comfortable breaking the silence.

¹Although the group of district trainers included two White men, the men did not regularly attend the support group meetings. One man has never attended because of scheduling conflicts and another has attended only sporadically.

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