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What Is Accountability? Conceptions and Challenges of Accountability in White Anti-Racism Organizing

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Independent Practitioner Inquiry Capstone:

What Is Accountability? Conceptions and Challenges of Accountability in White Anti-Racism

Organizing

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Capstone Proposal – Reflective Practice

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March 31, 2019

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Abstract

The term ‘accountability’ in anti-racism work holds an array of understandings, as well as criticisms, and is heavily contextual in nature. Deemed a necessity by nearly all within anti-racism work due to the socialized racial superiority of whiteness and white culture, in general accountability aims to minimize oppressive manifestations of this internalized superiority experienced by white people and expand white racial identity awareness with the intent to work non-oppressively and collectively towards racial equity and justice. This qualitative research aims to more concretely conceptualize ‘accountability’ within white anti-racism work to provide clarity around such a laden, nuanced and often overused term. The research intended to focus on personal accountability, which I identified as individual practices of accountability in relation to oneself, and interpersonal accountability, which I identified as the understanding and practice of accountability in relation to others. However, as evidenced in the findings, the approach and framing of the research in such a way came with its own issues and critiques.

This study contributes the voices and opinions of ten white anti-racism organizers and educators who were interviewed on their understandings of accountability, as well as the criticisms and challenges that surface in their work in its conceptualization and application. Although both literature and participants emphasized the importance of self-examination, mutual accountable interracial relationship building, and collective focus towards a shared analysis and macro-level goal of systems change to enact real change, participants highlighted further complications and challenges in the nature ‘accountability’ has been used in the work, including tokenizing people of color, reducing diverse social identities into one monolithic concept, the concept and directional flow of power, as well as an awareness of one’s underlying motives in this work. The research identified significant challenges in the application of accountability, further highlighting the complexity that white people navigate in anti-racism work.

I. Introduction

In American society, both race and whiteness are defined social constructs with real and significant social consequences (Guess, 2006). The dominance of whiteness is pervasive and invisible; dictating social norms and setting itself as the center off which everything is criticized or compared. DiAngelo (2012) describes whiteness as “both ‘empty,’ in that it is normalized and thus typically unmarked, and content laden or ‘full,’ in that it generates norms and reference ports, ways of conceptualizing the world, and ways of thinking about oneself and others” (p. 3). As Case (2012) states, “white culture and racism are so intertwined and normalized that white analysis of racism resembles a fish analyzing water” (p. 91). The saturation of this socialization inherently leaves white people, even those involved in anti-racism work, with blind spots that often result in the reproduction of the same oppressive and racist behaviors they work to alleviate (Chisom, 2010). Because of this lack of racial sensitivity and awareness, accountability in white anti-racism organizing is an absolute necessity for white people to understand how their whiteness and white superiority manifest. However, while there is wide agreeance in importance the of accountability, its nuance and subjectivity in interpretation leave those enacting it without a consensus of what exactly it means and looks like. Difference of opinions around the use of the term and how it is exercised exist among scholars and community organizers. It was from this desire of clarity around the concept that research was pursued. This study aimed to develop a clearer understanding of how accountability is conceptualized in white anti-racism work and what challenges commonly arise, both in definition and in practice, for those in the field.

In order to conceptualize accountability and its interwoven role in anti-racism, specifically white anti-racist accountability, it is necessary to better understand the racial socialization of whites. Theories of whiteness and white racial identity development have been of

interest in academic research for decades, with a developed focus on whiteness as its own unique racial identity formation (Croll, 2007). Kincheloe argues that whiteness itself is still difficult to define, however most observers agree that it intimately involves power differences and power-related processes between whites and non-whites (as cited by Guess, 2006). Socialized into a culture operating from the macro systems of white supremacy, racism, capitalism, and patriarchy, those who benefit from those systems subconsciously internalize feelings of superiority. Belief systems around racial identity evolve in response to these racial categorizations constructed by these societal systems (Lawrence and Tatum, 1998). Of the various white racial identity theories developed, Helm's (1990) six-status theory is frequently applied in racial identity research. In short, the theory reflects the varied stages of racial consciousness and awareness that white people experience in relation to their evolving racial attitudes, behaviors and beliefs (Malott, Paone, Schaeffle, Cates & Haizlip, 2014). While everyone experiences racial identity development to some degree, for whites, "the process involves becoming aware of one's 'whiteness,' accepting this aspect of one's identity as socially meaningful and personally salient, and ultimately internalizing a realistically positive view of whiteness which is not based on assumed superiority" (Lawrence and Tatum, 1998, p. 2). It is not a linear process. It is one that is fluid with individuals operating across or within more than one status at a time, dependent on the context of a situation (Okun, n.d.). Much of white racial identity development focuses on the need for a critical analysis of how racism manifests, critical self-analysis of one's "own value position in relation to others" (Sakamoto and Pitner, 2005, p. 441), and an increase in cross-racial experiences to deepen racial awareness.

Existing critiques of whiteness studies and white racial identity development theories should be noted, specifically regarding Helm's model. There is concern it reifies whiteness,

rather than decenters it (Malott, Paone, Schaeffle, Cates & Haizlip, 2014; Ahmed, 2004).

Similarly, Ahmed (2004) expresses that centering whiteness and whiteness studies inadvertently risks maintaining the narcissism that promotes whiteness as an all-encompassing social ideal. Scholars criticize that it focuses on the evolution of attitudes of whiteness towards other racial groups, further centering whiteness and perpetuating the notion of 'other' (Malott, Paone, Schaeffle, Cates & Haizlip, 2014). Additionally, the invisibility of whiteness grants whites the often-unrecognized opportunity to perceive themselves as individuals rather than belonging to a collective identity group (Mahoney, as cited by Case, 2012). Additionally, these models further endorse an individualistic approach, a symptom of whiteness in the focus on and development of the individual rather than identity as a communally and collectively influenced concept.

Further criticism rests in the last status of Helm's racial identity development theory, 'Autonomy'. It represents "the internalization of a positive white racial identity and is evidenced by a lived commitment to anti-racist activity, ongoing self-examination and increased interpersonal effectiveness in multiracial settings" (Lawrence and Tatum, 1998, p. 3). However, the absence of more nuanced research into what a positive perception of white racial identity actually means creates a limited understanding of how exactly whites engage in anti-racism activism (Malott, Paone, Schaeffle, Cates & Haizlip, 2014; Ahmed, 2004). Gardiner (2009) addresses this by straddling his understanding for the development of a positive white identity with an acute awareness of the inherent challenges it poses:

We are socialized by white institutions and we internalize white superiority. One of the difficult challenges we face as white people is to identify a positive way of being white while recognizing we live in a culture based on white supremacy. For me to affirm my whiteness in a culture of white superiority I may end up affirming or supporting white

supremacy. (p. 1)

Even with its challenges, individual and collective understanding of the formation of our racial identities in the context of whiteness and systemic racism are critical in racial justice work (Gulati-Partee and Potapchuk, 2014). Understanding these racial identity stages and processes allows white people to begin to identify how it influences their motives, behaviors and effectiveness as white anti-racism activists and educators (Edwards, 2006).

My research interests were a direct reflection of my personal experience, academic work and community activism in white anti-racism. As a facilitator and educator motivated by identity development, unearthing my own internalized superiority and dissecting my white racial identity as a white woman has been and continues to be an unnerving yet imperative process. Experience within local anti-racism, and specifically white anti-racism activism, in Washington DC and the northeast United States, as well as academic studies rooted in intercultural communication, identity and leadership, ingrained the necessity of critical self-examination to understand how my whiteness shows up, how my experience as a white woman impacts the lens with which I view feedback and engagement, and where resistance and superiority arise within myself as I continue to do this work. I came to recognize the importance of accountability and holding myself accountable across spaces, relationships, and communities, as well as within myself, so as to not replicate the harmful and oppressive behaviors I am simultaneously working to dismantle.

However, the term accountability seemed to be so often used within the field of anti-racism that its exact meaning seemed ambiguous and subjective, left to be defined by the user (in this case white people), and absent of critical consensus in application, thus having the potential to become empty words or counter-productive efforts guised as solidarity and allyship. What did accountability and being accountable actually mean and look like? As someone who recently

entered the intentional work of white anti-racism, I wanted to understand more comprehensively how the term accountability is understood and conceptualized from white anti-racism organizers, trainers and educators currently in the field. Additionally, as anti-racism work continues to expand, and language around white supremacy, whiteness, and white identity become more mainstream, I wanted to build this research as a collection of critical thinking around white anti-racism accountability, and its criticisms and critiques, for those white anti-racist organizers, educators and trainers entering into this work.

II. Literature Review

White Anti-Racism

Critical white studies have introduced opinions regarding the need of white anti-racists in dismantling systemic racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 1997). White anti-racism education and organizing are the intentional and conscious actions, both self and communal, taken by white individuals and groups to interrupt systems of racial inequity, actively confront racism, and work toward racial justice (Perry and Shotwell, 2009; Kivel, 2002). These actions, as DiAngelo (2018) notes, entail “applying awareness, knowledge, and skills in an accountable way, with deliberate intention and repeated practice” (p. 115). Antiracist education centers analysis on the social and institutional power that makes meaning of racial difference and seeks to interrupt the structures, social patterns and norms that work to maintain racial inequities (DiAngelo, 2012). While white anti-racists may value equity and justice, it requires endless work on the part of the white person to ensure their actions and behaviors are in line with those values. Even the most dedicated of white anti-racist activists are unable to completely eliminate the deeply socialized racial superiority, stereotypes and biases that whiteness has ingrained. In fact, according to Heldke, white anti-racists cannot ‘eradicate’ their ignorance; they can only commit to flushing out the

new and various ways that their ignorance arises (as cited in Sholock, 2012). The depth of systemic racial ignorance, even among self-aware white anti-racists, causes frequent “slippage” from conscious anti-racism to unconscious racism (Frankenberg, 1993). Because of this socialization and the fluidity of white people’s racial identity awareness, it’s critical that white anti-racists develop intentional processes that ground their racial analysis and support their unlearning of racist socialization to re-condition themselves as anti-racists (Olsson, 2004). These intentional processes and practices are methods of accountability.

Accountability in White Anti-Racism

Though used extensively throughout anti-racism work, most specifically in white anti-racism, accountability carries with it considerable nuance and lack of clarity around exactly what ‘being accountable’ means. Various perspectives and understandings of accountability exist. In general, accountability, both the concept and its application, is the deepening of white racial identity awareness, developing and examining oneself through a critical analysis of racism, and mitigating the oppressive manifestations of whiteness, individually and collectively, for the work of dismantling oppressive systems and the liberation of people of color. Accountability works to manage white people’s unlearning of socialized superiority, increase responsibility and racial awareness growth, align actions towards consciousness raising, and engage people in relationships and the work in non-oppressive ways (Tochluk & Levin, 2010). Kendall (2012) believes that for white people in anti-racism, it is about engaging in perpetual self-examination and reflection of how whiteness manifests in their perspectives and behaviors. Racial equity work “requires a certain type of accountability agreement...making a commitment to behave in a specific and intentional way; to challenge the status quo and dismantle systemic privilege” (Alyn, 2016, para. 9). Alyn (2016) also explains that accountability is “making clear agreements

about what's expected and about what happens as a result of actions we do or do not take" (para. 6). Crass' (2013) believes "it means being accountable to one's fellow organizers, to the goals of one's collectivity and ultimately to the people one claims to serve" (p. 165). The 'People's Institute for Survival and Beyond's definition of accountability, as quoted by Martinas' (2010), states:

Accountability is a position by which one will be held in check or account for one's decisions and actions...the acceptance of a role fits within a cultural, political, and social perspective that leads to the liberation of peoples of color from racism, oppression and cultural subordination (p. 166)

Day (2012) speaks to the interworking layers of accountability, both across and within racial identity groups, by saying:

Accountability has several faces: peoples of color are accountable to each other for their work to dismantle racism in their institutions; white people are accountable primarily to peoples of color in their institutions and community for their work to dismantle racism and are also accountable to each other for that work. (p. 162)

Literature discusses the various approaches white anti-racism educators and organizers use to recognize and interrupt the manifestations of whiteness within their anti-racism work. These included intentional accountability processes, workshops, white caucus groups, mission statements, contractual agreements, call-outs, and language guides (Luchies, 2014). They also involved developing organizational partnerships, leadership development and training, and relearning history. It is with the understanding that each one of these is only part of an interwoven and multifaceted web of accountable actions (Cushing & Hitchcock, 2010).

A significant component of accountability that the literature focused on was the role of continual critical self-reflection and self-inquiry. As discussed earlier, white people's racial sensitivity and awareness are inherently lacking due to the deep-rooted socialization of white supremacy. Cultivating that racial awareness starts largely in one's self; becoming conscious of whiteness, the ways they unknowingly perpetuate racial oppression, uncovering their own subconscious racial superiority and doing this reflection continuously. However, unlearning and self-examination do not occur in a vacuum; our racialized socialization continues around us at the same time. This is directly addressed by Case (2012), who proclaims, "trying to remove racism from one's language, behaviors, and subconscious, while simultaneously resisting the constant bombardment of racist socialization" requires a commitment from white anti-racists to the "ongoing process of self-examination" (p. 91). Adding to the internal questioning white anti-racists should undertake, Kivel (2000) stresses that white anti-racists should question who advises them, who reviews their work and with whom they consult as a part of holding themselves accountable in their efforts. White anti-racism educators, through examination of and inquiry into their own analysis and thought-process, can become aware of the ways they unknowingly impede dialogue and perpetuate white supremacy (ECCW, 2007).

Accountable Relationships

While self-examination is a critical piece of accountable action in anti-racism work, it alone cannot nor should it be where accountability rests. Literature heavily emphasizes and discusses the importance of relationship building. Anti-racist organizers and educators largely spoke to the necessity of being in accountable relationships to people and communities of color to set the foundations for unlearning and relearning. Day (2012) notes that anti-racism work should be rooted in accountable relationships and that accountability is a "relationship among

people, particularly people who have discerned a shared analysis of and commitment to a particular issue” (p.14). Gardiner shares a similar testament that “accountability to people of color refers specifically to white allies being accountable to people of color in the context of a multiracial coalition whose work is grounded in (or accountable to) a power analysis of racism.” (p. 4) According to Okun’s (n.d.) white racial identity development model, the ‘Collective Action’ phase finds white people beginning to realize that they really cannot do the unlearning of racism on their own and they need “to be in relationships with other white antiracist allies and people of color in order to develop a solid analysis of what is happening that includes the voices and experiences of broader range of people” (p. 16). Jeffries-Logan, Johnson, & Okun (n.d.) affirm that:

Accountability is in essence a form of solidarity, one that acknowledges the deep conditioning of all of us into a race construct that places white at the top while systematically devaluing people and communities of color...we are separated not just from each other but from ourselves, as we negotiate all the ways we have internalized the messages about what’s important. As such, accountability requires authentic relationship across these false yet powerful divides. (p. 2)

In awareness of the undue responsibility that can fall onto people of color in interracial anti-racism relationships, Kivel voices that white anti-racist organizers should seek to work with, not for, people of color toward collective liberation and “develop systems and structures to hold themselves accountable and be held accountable by members of oppressed groups, without placing the burden for accountability on the oppressed” (as cited by Edwards, 2006, p. 51). Gardiner (2009) writes that in order for real change to take effect, whites need be in accountable relationships with people of color, learn to relinquish our power, “work together across racial

lines to develop new ways of sharing power and creating accountable relationships” (p. 6). He also discusses what hinders white people’s accountability to people of color:

The internalized superiority of whites coupled with the inordinate institutional power that whites have stand in the way of achieving accountability. We who are white “come to the table” with the upper hand. We control the resources and often we assume that we have the answers to the problems at hand. We assume that the white way is the right way.

Moreover, white people don’t have a lot of personal experience following the leadership of people of color. (p. 4)

While the notion of ‘accountability to’ often is associated with white people’s accountability to people of color in multiracial coalition-building, white anti-racists in relationship with one another is also a necessary component of accountability in anti-racism. Martinas (2010), in describing the multiple facets of accountability, says it is the “process of building trustful, authentic relationships with others, both white and of color. Used in this sense, 'accountability' connotes 'relationship building,' especially between two people” (p. 3). Crass (2013) further supports white to white relationship in mentioning the absolute necessity of organizing in white communities and the building of white anti-racist leadership. Building off earlier discussions of a positive white identity and the tendency towards individualism in white culture, ECCW (2007) asserts that whites need to develop different form of engagement and communication among other white people in order to “[expand] white epistemology beyond individualism and establish a more affirmative white identity for thriving in a multicultural world” (p. 4).

Accountability Critique

While literature emphasized the necessity of accountability in anti-racism and the importance of having accountable relationships, the perspectives around the application, what

this looks like in action and how processes are maintained were equally discussed. The term accountability can be left to its own interpretation and understanding if the meaning is not clarified within and across established relationships and contexts. Day (2012) notes this by saying, “accountability can be a nebulous notion, with good intentions but no concrete effect, unless agreement is reached regarding the nature of the accountability” (p. 163). Jeffries-Logan, Johnson, & Okun (n.d.) note that the term has become well-worn within social justice work. It also can be used manipulatively among other white anti-racists. Without a determined set of values and principles, “accountability too often becomes a punitive instrument wielded for personal gain” (Jeffries-Logan, Johnson, & Okun, n.d., p. 3).

Scholars note how accountability systems, without critical and collective approaches, can unknowingly lead to complacency, build a false idea of ‘productivity’, and even reproduce the very oppression it aims to eradicate. The People’s Institute for Survival and Beyond states that white people strategizing together around unlearning racism, whether they’re conscious of it, can re-create the same structures of white supremacy and racism (as cited by Jones, 2013). In addressing white anti-racism feminism specifically, Sholock (2012) states that the practice of self-reflexivity can actually validate behaviors that are counter-productive and that white anti-racism activists can often undermine and manipulate one another, further emphasizing habits of manipulation and self-promotion. Luchies (2014) shares this concern on accountability principles:

When they are relied on too heavily, practiced in isolation, or become unquestionable as methods to work through particular forms of power and violence, they actually reproduce oppression in a variety of ways...uncritical routinization of such practices can produce a

sense of stability and either despair or accomplishment that deters the ongoing creation and critique of antioppression tools. (p. 102)

Tochluk and Levin (2010) advocate for the necessity of healthy, functional relationships to hold oneself accountable; that without them, these accountability guidelines can turn into “static standards of behavior that breed serious problems in real-life situations” (p. 195). A criticism that could be applied to this research, Jones (2013) points out white anti-racists’ tendencies to heavily perfect and intellectualize methods of action, often delaying actual engagement:

One of the unfortunate ways in which white anti-racist culture mimics white supremacy culture is our tireless dedication to "figuring out" how to be the perfect anti-racist. While we are congratulating ourselves 'cause we're getting closer to understanding what accountability really means; while we debate whether it's more effective to say X or Y thing at the people-of-color-led meeting, the world is broiling outside! People are dying out there, y'all! I guess if I have one overarching thing to say to white anti-racist activists it's this: Think less. Do more. How we do stuff is important. It really is. But it's not so important that we need to figure out all the intricacies of how to do the work before we dig in and start rolling up our sleeves. (p. 2)

Reversing Oppressive Power Structures

There is dispute around the role of power in accountable relationship building. Often the prevailing approach to accountability is the “one-sided” accountability model, where white people are expected to hold themselves accountable and continually defer to people of color, who are in the positions of power in this dynamic. Day (2012) states this as ‘veto power’ which is “the ability of the people of color to whom one is accountable to have the final say in any conversation, deliberation, decision, or action” (p. 14). Others, however, call this into question, framing it as merely a reversal of the oppressive power structure. Jeffries-Logan, Johnson, &

Okun (n.d.) note that while accountability is strongly connected to white people needing to be accountable to communities of color, it should not be a one-way street wherein the oppressed social group is always “right” and those of the dominant group are always “wrong”. For many, this is seen as an ineffective and ultimately harmful reversal of power hierarchy. Crass (2013) states:

Something that can happen is that we flip the hierarchy of racism. Instead of saying that white people are superior to people of color, both people of color and white people doing racial justice work position people of color on top and white people below, reinforcing the dehumanization we are trying to address. (p. 247)

Tochluk and Levin (2010) also call into question this “one-sided” approach to accountability and highlight the resulting feeling of being dehumanized:

When white people reactively enter relationships characterized by a power reversal that puts people of color in a superior position over white people, the problems inherent in any intentionally hierarchical system are bound to arise. Systems of dominance we have been acculturated into, such as white supremacy and patriarchy, are reflected in one-sided accountable relationships because one group continues to have power over another...Relationships built upon this uneven foundation lead towards feelings of dehumanization and differential worth and therefore do not help us create the non-oppressive relationships necessary to create a non-oppressive society. (p. 203)

Relationship building is an integral aspect of accountability and of effective anti-racism work. However, problems arise in the interpretation of what that relationship dynamic should look like, the direction power is applied, and how power is applied. Such a narrow and limiting approach to accountability creates barriers for collective accountability to develop. It also creates barriers for

white anti-racist organizers to do the healing necessary in order to do this work effectively so as to not perpetuate the same effect of white guilt that scholars have rendered ineffective in white anti-racism and alliance work (Tochluk and Levin, 2010).

Mutual Accountability, Authentic Relationships and Collective Alliance Building

To further emphasize the collective approach and understanding of accountability, much of the literature speaks of “mutual accountability”, “mutually accountable”, “authentic relationships”, “relationships of accountable mutuality”, and “transformational relationships”. Day (2012) writes that “accountability relationship[s] help to bring about the possibility of true mutuality” (p. 164). She also emphasizes the notion that whites can engage in transformational relationships of accountable mutuality and that collective liberation begins with constructing relationships where authentic dialogue and mutuality can grow (Day, 2012). Relationships of authenticity and mutuality are regarded as necessary if there is to be any real success in accountability efforts. As Alyn (2016) believes, “where there is an authentic bond and shared power and leadership, there will be different outcomes. Those outcomes will be more effective, relevant, lasting – and mutual” (para. 11). If white people’s focus remains on one-sided accountability to people of color, then only superficial relationships lacking depth, authenticity and meaningful dialogue will continue to be formed (Tochluk and Levin, 2010). Relationships with people of color will remain superficial unless our collective as well as individual roles in upholding white supremacy are understood (Kendall, 2013). To build this accountability to each other and ourselves requires “building systems of mutual support that help us acknowledge, normalize, and validate the inevitable emotions arising from oppression and deep socialization” (Jeffries-Logan, Johnson, & Okun, n.d., p. 3). Gulati-Partee and Potapchuk (2014) discuss racial identity caucusing as a powerful tool in collective accountability to navigate the manifestations

of structural racism, do the collective yet distinct racial group work toward racial equity, and build more authentic, integrated groups. Tochluk and Levin (2010) believe relationships are strongest “when built on a foundation of mutual partnership, respect and equality” (p. 204). Kendall (2012) discusses the collective effects of authentic relationship building and what it asks of both parties involved:

Authentic relationships across privilege are another situation entirely, because in those both people are self-aware and willing to keep channels of communication open about power and privilege differences... Authentic relationships across racial privilege involve the risk of losing social and cultural capital... Mutual respect is obviously essential, as is the determination not to make assumptions about one another and about the relationship. Each step toward deepening has to be tested to be sure that both people see it the same way. (p. 176)

Tochluk and Levin (2010), as part of AWARE-LA (Alliance of White Anti-Racists Everywhere- Los Angeles), promote a path of transformative alliances and away from the one-sided accountability to people of color by building trust, entering into alliances on equal footing, remaining individually and collectively accountable for how various privileges arise, and by “providing leadership alongside, not over, one another” (p. 211). They claim the following:

Relationships intended to serve a racial/social/economic justice agenda will be stronger and more productive if they are founded from their beginnings in an approach that values each individual’s essential humanity, offers mutual respect, and holds open the possibility for trust to be achieved. (p. 206)

III. Research Methodology

The methodological approach used for this study was an exploratory research, with findings based on a review of the current literature as well as interviews conducted with 10 white anti-racism organizers and educators. With the methodology choice of exploratory research, and the smaller sample size, the findings did not intend to be final or conclusive. The intent instead, as the methodology suggests, was to explore the research question further and serve as a significant theory-building research effort in the field. Since the qualitatively-based research aimed to collect a meta story of specifically white anti-racism accountability, how it is conceptualized and understood within white anti-racism work and relationship building, and the challenges in its execution, only anti-racist organizers and educators who self-identified as white were considered for participation. Inclusion of the voices and perspectives from people and organizers of color were considered in the development of this research proposal; however, with the focus being an analysis on white anti-racist organizers and educators' conception of accountability, ultimately research only went on to include self-identified white anti-racist organizers and educators. Participants from a variety of roles within white anti-racism work were sought, including independent trainers and consultants, anti-racism trainers from prominent racial equity organizations, as well as locally based community organizers and activists. The choice to conduct individual interviews provided the opportunity for more descriptive feedback in my qualitative data analysis. Individuals were selected and contacted using preexisting connections from my own white anti-racism activism work, "word of mouth" suggestions by other participants, and individuals discovered through online research into white anti-racism organizing and training. Participants were located across the continental United States, but predominantly located on the east coast due to the researcher's current location and pre-established networks. Individuals and organizations were contacted via email and provided a

brief overview of the research's intent and process. Available participants who were interested in partaking in the research were then scheduled a time to be interviewed, as well as a copy of the interview questions and the Participant Consent Form (See Appendix A).

Research was conducted in two phases. Phase one consisted of an analysis of current literature of white anti-racism and accountability to develop understandings of its perceptions and critiques within the field. Phase two entailed field-based perspectives gathered through interviews around accountability and its challenges from white anti-racist educators and organizers. Research aimed to interview 10 to 12 white anti-racist educators and organizers and 10 individuals were successfully interviewed. The interviews lasted anywhere from 30 to 60 minutes in a semi-structured format, containing some pre-set questions as well as allowance for an open-ended course of conversation to allow data to go where it may. Questions were separated into three general sections: demographic-related questions, questions around the concept of accountability, and questions around the application and challenges of accountability (See Appendix B). The pre-set interview questions were sent ahead of time to participants to allow them time to consider their thoughts and responses. All interviews were conducted over the phone and recorded and transcribed through a secure voice recording app. Coding of transcripts was completed using NVivo 12, a qualitative data analysis software that allows users to systematically organize data for themed coding. Both open coding and selective coding of the data were completed. Open coding involved sorting the raw data into categorized 'nodes' or themes captured from the research questions and existing research. These included the concept of accountability, personal accountability, interpersonal accountability, challenges of accountability. Selective coding followed, which was the coding of data into more abstract

themes that emerged from the data analysis and open coding. These included individual versus collective, leadership and power, accountability dynamics, and self-interrogation.

Limitations

Because the aim of this research was to interview 10 to 12 organizers in the field of white anti-racism organizing, the quantity interviewed inhibits the research from being able to be identified as comprehensive and applicable across the field, thus findings are more suggestive than determinant. However, with 10 educators and organizers interviewed, this sample size works to serve as a theory-building research effort. Additionally, while the focus of this research was on white anti-racists perceptions of accountability, it is still a limitation that the voices and perceptions of organizers and communities of colors were not included. The fact that research focused on white anti-racism voices ran the risk that is evidenced heavily above – that white people, regardless of the depth of self-work undertaken in unlearning deeply racist socialization, including the researcher, will inherently be shortsighted in noting key aspects of race-based studies and practice. Given that research was a critical examination of white anti-racism, and the researcher was white, research was conducted from an influenced identity, potentially affecting data analysis and its interpretations.

While participants' experiences in the work spanned multiple generations, (length of active time in anti-racism community work ranged from three to 30+ years), the majority of participants had been engaged in the work for over 25 years and half of the participants were 55 to 60 years of age. With only two individuals having been involved in the work for less than 10 years, and given social identity theory and anti-racism analysis are always evolving, it would have benefitted the research to include the voices of those more recently involved in anti-racism activism and education. Another potential limitation is that three of the participants in this

research are employed by the same faith-based, anti-racism training and consulting organization. This had the potential to skew data as they have received similar training and operate under the same mission and values, thus their responses and perspectives may not vary as widely had they been representatives of three separate organizations.

IV. Data Presentation

Interview questions generally followed three phases: demographic, conceptual, and application and challenges. During the second and third phase, participants were inquired about and provided their responses on how accountability is understood as a concept in white anti-racism, what interpersonal accountability and relationship building look like, and the challenges of accountability both in concept and in practice. For most of the interviews, the research questions were not necessarily asked in order; rather the conversations flowed organically, covering all of these topics at various points. The following sections cover the participants' responses and how they correlate with the earlier literature research conducted. In asking of the challenges of accountability, themes emerged across the interviews, resulting in being presented as the research's findings and will be discussed in the next section.

Accountability Conceptualized

As a central part of this research, participants were asked their understanding of the concept of accountability. While this was frequently revisited throughout each interview, in the initial inquiry of the term, several participants said they understood accountability to be a sense of responsibility, relationships, alignment with values, principles, integrity and intentions, and individual actions as well as the larger collective ones. The research intended to focus on both personal and interpersonal accountability, and while the critique of that approach will be discussed later, all participants did speak of accountability in terms of themselves individually at

some point. Most commented on the standard tools of self-reflection, self-inquiry, taking responsibility and taking action, listening and stepping up, looking at and using their privileges, as well as leaning into vulnerability and discomfort. This aligned with literature's earlier discussed approaches of accountability of perpetual self-examination and willingness to take responsibility and action (Case, 2013; Day, 2012; Potapchuk, 2005).

When considering the dynamics of structural racism, a number of participants also referred to accountability as understanding how all levels of society operate and interact and working together, a reflection in line with Gulati-Partee and Potapchuk's (2014) and Perry and Shotwell's (2009) understanding of the individual and communal dynamics in the context of structural racism. One participant first presented their concept of accountability with a deep analysis of this understanding of accountability to the systemic, collective dynamics:

We talk about accountability to communities of color and to the experiences and shaping of communities of color, and to the needs of communities of color. We also talk about an accountability to an analysis of systemic racism...an accountability to the authority of a particular framework of looking at how our culture became white dominant, and how it became centered as what's normative, standard, and good. Further, we talk about an accountability to dismantling the dynamics or the relationship between that dominant center and marginalized communities. So, there's an accountability to a framework, there's an accountability to the work of dismantling racism, or dismantling white supremacy, the supremacy of whiteness, the ideological supremacy of whiteness, and then there is an accountability to the authority of people of color's experiences and their own understanding of what it takes to dismantle that which is oppressive.

While they did not cite Helm's theory directly, three participants did mention the importance of understanding one's racial identity formation. They expressed consciousness of the stages that individuals pass between in terms of themselves individually and in relation to others, with an initial understanding of "what white identity means in terms of how I act out of it, all of the defensiveness, all of the fragility" and the "unlearning of internalized white superiority" to developing "more in terms of how you're in relationship and the depth of the relationship." One participant expressed the challenge of accountability in this way:

The biggest thing with white people and accountability is the challenge to figure out how to recognize how we've been misshaped by whiteness, recognize our own tendency to discount, discredit, destroy the ways of approaching things with people of color, and that even as good white folks who are committed to doing this work we have been socialized so profoundly into that.

Accountability Critique

However, a few participants made known their discontent with the term accountability and its use in racial equity work. One participant had trouble formulating their concept of the term's role in anti-racism, as they "started avoiding the word accountability" because they "found it so overused and underdefined" and that it "becomes a litmus test and a weapon to be used against people, rather than a thoughtful concept to be explored with some nuance." This similarly confirms what Jeffries-Logan, Johnson, & Okun (n.d.) had recognized as an overuse of the term in social justice circles. Accountability, as noted in the literature, has often been used as a motive for "ego-boosting or self-satisfaction" among white anti-racists, as one participant noted. They also frankly put:

There's a lot of bullshit around accountability. I think that accountability has in many places, especially on the internet, become a word that white people use as a weapon against each other...we police each other too much. White anti-racist people have for a long time gotten a lot of ego boosting or self-satisfaction out of shitting on other anti-racist white people. We do that same thing of stepping on other people to make ourselves feel better. It's just not helpful.

This supports earlier claims by Jeffries-Logan, Johnson, & Okun's (n.d.) and Sholock's (2012) who spoke about the use of accountability as a punitive tool of manipulation and as a way to self-promote and preserve the "good white person" image. Other participants commented similarly that often when doing this work, in 'accountability' there is this underlying "ideological purity", "a sort of perfection" and "rule based approach" about it all. One participant said this functions in a way they would view as toxic, rather than a willingness to make mistakes and engage in meaningful dialogue around the complexity that is this work.

Self-Interrogation

While participants did not state so directly, arguably the most prominent illustration of accountability throughout all the interviews was the extensive self-interrogation conducted by each individual. With every question that was asked of each participant, much of their responses were full of numerous introspective and critical questions that they consider and think about, indicating indirectly how deeply tied self-interrogation is to accountability. The presence of persistent self-interrogation and examination adequately illustrates the amount of consideration that takes place, and some may say is required, in this work, especially as a white person. It also affirms the importance that literature placed on self-reflection, self-examination and self-inquiry. The ability to consciously and constantly examine not only one's perceptions and actions but

also those of others and of situations in relation to self, and the various dynamics, potential outcomes, and impacts, is a wearing yet critical and necessary in anti-racism work. The more specificity and forethought these questions have, the more it exemplifies the depth an individual has on the nuance and the complexity of the dynamics of anti-racism work as a white person. It highlights an awareness of the work's complexity.

Personal Accountability

The notion of personal accountability in anti-racism work proved to be complex. Personal accountability, for the purposes of this research, was understood as the individual actions that are taken by white anti-racists to ensure they themselves are holding themselves accountable. However, it was stressed both in the literature and among many participants that accountability should not and cannot be understood through individual action. That to focus and compartmentalize anti-racism work as such moves us away from the larger collective approach required to truly transform macro-level oppressive systems. And yet, many of the practices and actions are by definition individual in nature, and to not identify and acknowledge their necessity would be a disservice to the work. Through this research, I came to be understood that while accountability cannot be defined by nor approached individual actions, it is comprised of interwoven individual and collective actions and understandings.

Most participants did point to specific personal conducts of self-examination, taking responsibility, being reflective and willing to receive feedback, continual education, and building relationships with communities of color and fellow white anti-racists. These are in line with Kendall's (2013) and Case's (2012) take on personal accountability as involved being involved in perpetual self-examination and reflection to minimize the harm that white people's deeply racist socialization can, even subconsciously, cause. One participant took a step further by saying

“it's not just about being conscious of my own defensiveness and of my own fragility and of my own control needs, it's also being conscious of trying to interrupt that.” Self-reflection, as one participant explained it, involves paying attention to our actions as well as our reactions, saying “I can tell what I did wrong pretty quickly...there is that sense of like, ‘oh, yeah, that was a mistake’.” Another participant spoke candidly about the realities of the work as a white person. Similar to Frankenberg’s point of inevitable “slippage” into oppressive behavior (as cited in Shollock, 2012), this participant describes the inherent contradictions that arise:

And I think constantly about myself and continuing to lean into being vulnerable. And you want to be the good white person, you want to make sure you're doing your best, you're contributing and you're not replicating and you're not causing harm. And at the same time, it is our reality always. So, it is holding that paradox of working to be your best and knowing at the same time, the level of missteps you'll make along the way, be okay to speak about it.

The same participant spoke also to the fear that this reality can insight, as did another participant, who said that part of their self-recovery work has been learning how to navigate releasing that fear so that they can act while simultaneously become better at accepting critical feedback.

While the details of individual versus collective understanding of accountability will be discussed in the next section, a majority of participants did critique the concept’s tendency to emphasize individualized behaviors. Several participants noted that this propensity in anti-racism work is largely informed by our Western and U.S. socialized norms of individualism. This was similarly critiqued in the literature by ECCW’s (2007) who highlighted that the racial identity development models implicitly focus on the individual, a concept that is reinforced within whiteness and white supremacy. This perspective was aptly illustrated by one of the first

individuals interviewed. When asked about their understanding of personal accountability in anti-racism work, they provided a critique of this approach of the research question:

I think the first thing that comes to my mind is that the way you frame your research question I find a little bit problematic. And I think part of the problem with accountability is this idea that accountability can be isolated as interpersonal, which leads us to individual concept. And I think that accountability is so much more complex than that... I don't think we can just hold each other or one another accountable individually. I think that's kind of our it's, there's slippery slopes that we can go down because of the dominant culture and the dominant white culture in this country.

While participants understood the deep importance of self-examination as an individual practice, they emphasized that individual behaviors are inextricably linked with community actions on a collective level. One participant noted white anti-racists tendency to think of accountability in relation to individual behaviors and what is missed when they do so:

So often white folks, we just get caught up in our individual behaviors, or in the theoretical, cognitive understanding of what's going on. And we miss the fact that our behaviors are having an impact on our colleagues of color as a collective.

In general, most participants made explicit mention of the necessity to think of accountability outside of individual behaviors and understand on a deeper level its interconnectedness with the collective.

White Healing

One aspect of accountability that half of the participants spoke about was the idea and importance of personal racial healing. When discussing their personal accountability, one participant said “a lot of my internal accountability is about self-compassion” which speaks to

Tochluk and Levin's (2010) belief in the necessity of white anti-racists to conduct self-compassion and healing work in order to show up more effectively within anti-racism. In regard to deepening one's self-compassion and awareness of the role that shame can play on some white anti-racists, a participant spoke about the behaviors they have witnessed:

I will never forget the point of time where we realized how much guilt and shame was being held by our membership. And that it translated into this seeking to compete with other white people, to show up and show that we're really the best white person in the room, or the I need to take this person down a notch, or my frustration with all these other people who don't know it like I do. Just all these behaviors and attitudes that are really about judging other white people as being less evolved than we individually are.

This undermining of one another is likely an attempt, albeit unhealthy and ineffective, to construct a positive racial identification with their whiteness; to find and preserve, in whatever way they can, the feeling of goodness to override the guilt. This concept of the "good white person" was discussed in half of the interviews, with participants aware of where this desire comes from and the detriment it has on anti-racism efforts to be effective. Other participants promoted healing work with one explaining it something they do so that they "don't act out negatively towards others who are entering the work" and another emphasizing the importance of self-compassion, that without it "a lot of white anti-racism organizers [are] going to be really deeply burnt out and unwell and depressed." This focus on self-compassion and healing are ways these participants are working towards building a positive identification with being white, to not operate from a place of guilt and shame, but to operate from a place of humility.

Nearly half of the participants noted the concept of healing in terms of recovering their own humanity and moral framework that has been lost due to the structural oppression of white

supremacy and whiteness. This coincides Edward's (2006) take on Freire (2000), saying "on a deeper level, members of dominant groups may suffer a loss of authenticity and humanity as a result of their unearned privilege and dominant position in society" (p. 43). It also seems to be representative of Helm's (1990) stage of Autonomy, wherein individuals are actively working to find a positive racial identification with being white and are in lived commitment to social justice and anti-racist work. Two individuals specifically tied healing to their anti-racism goals of self and collective liberation, supporting Bishop's belief of the need for dominant group members to break free of their own pain and to become "a worker in your own liberation" (as cited by Edwards, 2006, p. 44) to be truly effective in their anti-racism work. However, another participant, when inquired about this idea of healing and recovery, was cognizant of the potential problem with the language white people may use to explain this lost morality and humanity. They were quick to mention a learning that was raised from the community of color their organization is in partnership with:

The conversation was about the trauma of racism, and I think the statement was made that by a white colleague, or it could have been me, it was one of us, using the language of trauma to describe that whole what has been done to white folks in terms of taking away our humanity. And so, our colleagues of color really challenged us on the use of that language and said, 'please do not use that language to talk about what racism has done to you, if you want to use the language of moral injury, fine, and then explore what that moral injury means.'

This same individual, then, did speak on the importance of white people doing the hard self-work to not act out of that moral injury and stripping and doing the work both collectively with white

people as well as to “really struggl[e] with the accountability of that moral or ethical framework in multi-racial community.”

Two individuals spoke specifically to the work of white anti-racism spaces creating welcoming spaces for whites to come into the work, rather than aim for the ‘white tears’ to know that the work has been done. That white people can bypass intentional white guilt and shaming because if the person is in the process of raising consciousness around these issues, naturally a critique of their behaviors and attitudes will arise and that will already be challenging. She said:

If you're taking it seriously, you're going to come up against those feelings of shame or guilt quite likely. That said, if the way that you are enticed into that conversation is one that's already telling you “look, getting mired in guilt is not the point here, then I think it's easier to bypass the internal emotions or at least to ride them out without thinking deeply into something. I don't find shame to be a redeemable emotion.

Interpersonal Accountability and Relationship Building

When discussing accountability in terms of interpersonal relationships, participants spoke frequently about intentional multi-racial relationship building, mutuality, developing and deepening trust, transparency, the sharing of similar language and level of analysis, and parsing out the complexity of authenticity in relationships. It was much in line with Okun’s (n.d.) ‘Collective Action’ phase of white racial identity, wherein the work of undoing racism cannot be done alone, and white anti-racists must be in relationship with other white anti-racists and people of color to develop a solid and rich analysis of racism and its manifestations around them. They also spoke of the difficulties and the pitfalls that come with relationship building on the part of the white people in the search for interpersonal accountability relationships. In addition, almost

all participants emphasized the importance of white anti-racists seeking and building accountable relationships with one another.

Mutuality and Authenticity

Half of the participants discussed their desire to develop mutual and transparent relationships, speaking to Day's (2012) emphasis on transformational relationships of accountable mutuality. They spoke on the importance for relationships to be based not only in trust and respect, but also mutuality in terms of openness, support, learning, and collective liberation, backing Tochluk and Levin's (2010) belief that a foundation of mutual respect and equality is what builds strong relationships. One participant spoke about mutuality, trust and relationship building as "a very interwoven process...the more you build relationships, the more trust you build, the more mutuality you build...the relationships I have, I hope are mutual" while another participant spoke to the difficulty of truly living into mutual accountability, saying "I talk a lot about how accountability should be mutual and it's really scary. I almost never, if ever, give critical feedback to Black organizers." One participant spoke on their relationships with their colleagues of color:

When I'm training alongside my colleague of color, I need to be accountable to them in the way that we facilitate. And coming to understand, we might have a strong relationship that has built over time, in which we can call each other out on things, we may have built for the strength of that relationship in such a way that we can give real honest feedback to one another. Sometimes that's hard to do, especially because of the racialized dynamic.

Authenticity was another aspect of relationships that most participants addressed, with a majority recognizing the deep complexity that exists of white people's ability to actually build transparent and authentic relationships. Two participants specifically mentioned the systemic power

imbalances that impede authentic relationships from developing between white people and those from marginalized groups. One participant believed an authentic relationship “needs to be one that is not power based” but in a society that has unequally distributed both wealth and power, he questioned “how do you then find those relationships and spaces where those can be cultivated in the way that there isn’t an imbalance of power?” The other participant commenting on the power imbalance within relationships said, “it takes a really long time to build an authentic relationship with someone, particularly when one of those people comes from a class where there is deep oppression history in each of your bodies.” Both of these highlight what Kendall (2012) mentioned previously regarding authentic relationships across power and privilege differences being one that requires open communication and self-awareness. Another participant explained their own struggle with authenticity and self-awareness in terms of authenticity with herself:

It is so hard for us to undo the socialization, the internalized racist superiority, that while our intentions might be authentic, our ability to engage transparently means that we have a better handle on who we are and I don't think many of us have moved to the point of being authentically engaged with ourselves enough that we can fully bring ourselves to those relationships, and yet we have to keep trying... I've always thought that I have been in authentic relationships, I've thought that I've been in relationships where I'm fully transparent and I know that because of all the lies that I've internalized, they're unconscious, I don't know myself well enough yet to be able to bring the full sense of transparency except to say that I'm still in the work. I'm still trying. I'm not going away... I'm trying to develop a humility in the face of this huge, I don't know what to call it, shit, that makes authentic relationships between people who live in harm's way every day, and people who are on the side of being the oppressor, that makes relationships difficult.

Shared Language and Analysis

When considering interpersonal relationship building across lines of privilege between white people and communities of color, half of the participants mentioned the notion of seeking and building accountable relationships with those who hold a shared language and analysis of systemic racism. Day (2012) pointed to this particular importance in accountable multiracial relationship building; that an element in building accountable relationships with communities of color is doing so with those who share similar language and power analysis of racism. One participant noted how important is it to be accountable to “people affected who are not just reacting out of their immediate oppression” but who “have an understanding of what are the things that led to [that oppression].” Another participant noted that

To say we're gonna be accountable to this one person of color without that person of color necessarily having a shared analysis is dangerous... what we're aiming for is accountability to communities of color with a shared analysis of systemic racism...it can't just be one person, it's a community, that community has to have the shared analysis, we have to be talking about the same thing and understanding what's happening in the way that racism shapes us, culturally, institutionally, and individually.

A third participant explained it as such:

When we say systemic analysis, we're pretty clear we mean, those people who have worked hard to figure out how this stuff is working, how it's worked and engaged historically, and in our current realities, so that our entire analysis is built on the scholarship of people of color.

Two individuals also specifically mentioned the importance of shared language, with one saying that in his work communities, they “come to those shared definitions, so that we can actually be accountable for one another as far as what we mean when we talk about accountability.”

White to White

During almost every interview, in discussing interpersonal relationships, participants stressed the importance of building relationships with other white anti-racists. Case (2012) stressed that in the absence of this critical white to white support, “white anti-racists will likely be overwhelmed with feelings of isolation that may result in abandoning their striving for social justice” (p. 94). While participants did speak about the ego-boosting and manipulation that often occurs between whites in anti-racism work, they equally spoke on the value and benefit of white to white relationships, particularly white caucus groups. Gulati-Partee and Potapchuk (2014) pointed to racial caucus groups as an effective tool in collective racial equity work. These racial caucus groups allow whites to talk and support, and be supported by, other whites, where they can make mistakes or discuss mistakes made, and share openly without the causing harm to people of color in the room. Participants emphasized the critical learning that can come from being in relationship with other whites also grappling with difficult questions and navigating this complex work as a white person. One participant stated that “white only spaces have been hugely important” for them and their learning and that the opportunity to make mistakes in the moment that “are not at the expense of people of color” has been a real component of taking responsibility. Crass (2013) also spoke on the absolute necessity of white communities engaging together in their anti-racism activism, leadership and education efforts. Caucusing, as one participant put it, also provides a space for white people to “act out their own internalized

superiority and...work in community together [to] help us all struggle with that.” One participant explained the role white caucus groups served for them:

White caucus was a place of accountability with the individuals that I met with on a regular basis...in terms of them knowing what I was working on, asking for support, and being pushed to make sure I was following through on some of the commitments that I had made.

White racial caucus groups are a place “where we can talk about instances where we have messed up” and “to challenge one another to think through what's an appropriate way to respond, how might we begin to go about repairing those broken relationships” as one participant described them.

V. Findings

After the interview data was analyzed and sorted based on the themes stemming from the research questions, four additional distinct themes emerged. These four themes in large part answered the research's inquiry into the challenges that anti-racism accountability poses. The challenges discussed below were prevalent throughout the interviews, acting as underlying connectors across all participant interviews. The themes have been identified as the following: 1) the role of individual versus collective understanding of accountability; 2) the role and impacts of leadership and power in anti-racism accountability; 3) motives in accountability and accountable relationship building and 4) the complex and contextual dynamics of accountability.

Individual versus Collective

As the research was approached, the perception was that accountability was a multi-layered concept that could be broken into approaches of personal, interpersonal, communal and organizational. And while personal or interpersonal accountability actions and behaviors

transpire, it was made clear from the research that the majority of participants firmly believe that to even conceive accountability from the individual point of view undermines much of what it aims to achieve; that unlearning the instinctive individual mindset, and to center a collective and communal framing, is part of the work. Putting it simply, a participant said, “accountability is not wholly independent” and to frame it as something that can be separated into personal and interpersonal actions slides into a white culture dominated narrative of individualism and emphasis on individual behavior. Another participant explained that it is white people’s tendency to think in “very one-to-one, interpersonal, how did I harm this particular person of color” and that “it’s a very Western white way of thinking to think so individually [when] often our colleagues of color are thinking in a collective sense.” They also expressed:

So often the white folks, we just get caught up in our individual behaviors, or in the theoretical, sort of, cognitive understanding of what's going on. And we miss the fact that our behaviors are having an impact on our colleagues of color as a collective.”

One participant felt that accountability has become a buzzword only if it is understood superficially and individually, “if you think you can be an individual anti-racist, you're missing something.” They went on to share:

Part of the problem with accountability is this idea that accountability can be isolated as interpersonal, which leads us to individual concept. And I think that accountability is so much more complex than that and has to do with our relationship [with] collective work...I don't think we can just hold each other or one another accountable individually. I think that's kind of our it's, there's slippery slopes that we can go down because of the dominant culture and the dominant white culture in this country...we're so

socialized into individualism. And so, it creates all kinds of problems if we start trying to conceive of accountability being in any way an interpersonal thing.

Another participant noted the tendency in accountability to individualize “the behavior instead of thinking about how you are transforming the systems and the structures.” Similarly, one participant critiqued, “how much identity politics and honoring of the individuals are we doing versus how much is there a communal lead that we're trying to focus on?” One participant explained it as:

We're talking about collective action to really make societal change, that we need to be working in coordinated ways with other people. There's still as a sense of, I am part of something larger than just myself. And so, there is a way that I need to be aware of that, and knowledgeable of that and connected to that in some way. So that's kind of a more macro level.

Many participants framed accountability in the need to make sure that they are collectively moving in the ‘same direction’, especially in the communities or institutions they are in partnership with, and understand the responsibility of their privilege in those institutional spaces to shift those power dynamics, with one individual saying:

So we understand that our individual actions in a collective are really connected to a very broad picture of how our society is operating at a kind of at a macro level, and how that impacts us, then the question of accountability is, what does it take to have people working together in ways that can shift the power dynamic, and the institutions and organizations that we work in, and in the way that communities mobilize?

Gardiner (2009) also spoke to whites’ responsibility to transform the institutions they are in, saying that “accountability to people of color is critical but it too is insufficient if we who are

white don't take responsibility for changing the institutions that we presently control." This is an evolving understanding for white anti-racists to grow in the work and in their racial identity development; to unlearn their associations and gravitations towards individualistic framing and instead emphasize accountability within a collective and a community. The community that white anti-racists are grounded in and struggle alongside, and the collective organizing that they are a part of, should illustrate and frame accountability.

Leadership and Power

Throughout much of the literature, the role of leadership and power in accountability is illustrated as "one-sided", where accountability is recognized as white people being 'accountable to' people of color, and that power being largely one-directional. However, while it was agreed by all participants that accountability to people of color should be emphasized and leadership of people of color should be followed, most also voiced that this should not be in absence of agency, leadership, and voice on the part of whites. To state simply that white people should be 'accountable to people of color' carries various consequences, as the research found. First, it reduces 'people of color' to a monolithic concept, rather than extremely diverse identity groups with differing opinions. It also assumes that white people are willing and able to simply follow the leadership of people of color, without understanding the deep social conditioning of distrust of people of color leadership that manifests within our white superiority. With framing people of color as the approvers of white anti-racist actions, it sets white people up to unintentionally tokenize and burden people of color as teachers in order to seek that approval. Lastly, it also sends the message that white anti-racists are without agency and meant to be silent followers with no space to be leaders themselves. We get caught in this dichotomy of a "right" and a

“wrong”, that we must be either leaders or followers, rather than working to build something that can exist in between.

Monolithic Identity Group

The major problem with ‘accountability to people of color’ or even the uniformity of the phrase ‘people of color’ is that it, as one participant put it, “flattens all people of color into this monolithic group, which I would argue is another form of racism.” In many ways, it’s a manifestation of white supremacy, to consolidate all that is non-white into one category, thereby stripping all diversity of the varying opinions and experiences within it. It becomes problematic when ‘accountable to people of color’ is casually instructed and used without explanation of its context and analysis; it insinuates that it is one identity group with one collective opinion. The same participant noted the diverse approaches to anti-racism work that exist within communities of color and said the challenge lies in knowing “how do you promote a notion of accountability with sensitivity to that diversity?” They went on further to say:

One of the things I think we need to help white people in anti-racist work figure out is how do we not just make a notion of accountability continue to support a racist idea that all black people are the same or all people of color are the same. If you broaden it out to people of color, then we got even bigger issues.

Another participant noted how this challenge in accountability arises repeatedly within mostly-white organizations and institutions. Often times because one ‘person of color’ was present at a decision-making table, the institution feels that they were ‘accountable to people of color’. This does not take into account, as the participant explained, “the power dynamic of that individual person having to represent all people of color [or] the fact that their employment may be on the line...there’s a dynamic there that is very real.” This oppressive dynamic permeates throughout

almost every industry and professional space, resulting in harm and immense burden to the individuals and communities subjected to it, that it proves further the necessity and responsibility of white people to disrupt the social structures around them and actively confront and transform their institutional spaces.

Leadership of People of Color

White institutional culture and its example of leadership are what we have internalized. As Bivens (2005) noted, “a consequence of systemic racism is the fact that people of color do not benefit from, or share ownership and leadership in the institutions that shape our lives” (p. 48). Gardiner (2009) also noted how “the internalized superiority of whites coupled with the inordinate institutional power that whites have” result in white people always having an upper hand (p. 4). Given our deep socialization of what leadership looks like, it’s no wonder that historically, white people have had difficulty following the leadership of people and communities of color. One participant quoted Ronald Chisolm, the co-founder of The People’s Institute for Survival and Beyond, as noting this inherent lack of trust in leadership and direction of people of color. This same participant stated that they then believe “accountability is the antidote to white folks’ inability to accept leadership and direction from people of color.” Even if intentions and desires are there, if white people are unaware of the way white superiority has manifested in how they assign value and legitimacy, once faced with leadership that seemingly contradicts and challenges their understanding of what leadership looks and feels like, white people, even white anti-racists, may be inclined to discredit and discount it.

Tokenizing

This common accountable leadership approach of people of color over whites can become unconstructive as white people relinquish their own decision-making, relying instead on

approval from people of color. It results in additional burden and responsibility on people of color and a lack of critical thinking and engagement on the part of white people. One participant noted that “white people can become so desperate for a person of color to validate them that they end up tokenizing people.” Another participant shared their own example of how they tokenized a person of color instead of applying their own critical thinking and decision-making:

We take something that one person of color has said to us and apply it - we treat that person as the ambassador the race, to that group... so, I was doing that thing where a white person just gives all of their belief in one person and thinks that she's being accountable by doing that.

It also builds the supposition that white people should constantly be monitored and regulated in their anti-racism work. In fact, one participant in their critique of this approach, said “there's that monitoring thing that doesn't work for me. I really struggle with thinking that's a helpful idea or that even that any Black people I know would want that to be their job...isn't that exhausting?” They also noted another shortfall. The time spent educating and monitoring white people is time that people of color could be spending organizing within their own communities. Instead, as Gardiner (2009) noted, “we who are white need to be leaders working to dismantle white power and white supremacy in our core institutions...at times we will need learn to relinquish our power [as well as] develop new ways of sharing power.”

Shared Leadership

One participant spoke to the dysfunction that exists in the common power and leadership accountability structure in anti-racism. Remarking further on how power is often viewed as one-directional and one is either with or without power, they said “it's not [about] having all the power. It's stepping up and holding a community in the struggle to reset the power. To, instead of

consolidating power, expand it.” Leadership and the power to lead are not reserved for only one person or group, but can be mutual, collective leadership that is shared. Gardiner (2009) emphasized the importance of developing new ways to share power. The dysfunction lies in our white institution, top-down understanding of leadership. White anti-racists and organizers of color in anti-racism must work together collectively to create a new, collective vision of what shared leadership can and should look like. A participant expanded further on this with a profound reframing of what leadership can be:

We're working to support the leadership of people of color, while not letting white people off the hook to still lead. Not lead as the only leaders but to be a part of leading, to participate in the act. That would be like the individual practice - still being a leader without having to be in charge.

A similar sentiment was shared by another participant. When discussing the ways white people need to relinquish the typical power dynamic found in white culture, they said much of racial justice work is “about can white people let go of having to be the ones in charge?”

Agency and Humility

Much of white anti-racism struggles with how, when, and where white voices are needed and should be heard. As noted earlier, a common takeaway whites experience as they deepen their racial identity awareness is that they should shut up and listen. Given the dominance of whiteness and white voices in society, this approach may largely be effective especially as one's awareness of oppression and privilege deepens. However, it should not be the case 100% of the time. In fact, a few scholars argued that silence is a space of safety, not one of learning and risk-taking. Many participants spoke about power, voice and agency as a white person in the work. In

an example of the self-interrogation that goes on when considering agency and voice in the work, one participant shared their internal line of questioning:

What are the gifts, skills and responsibility that I have as a white person to contribute to creating a racially just world? What do I need every single day when I wake up to do and to think about, and how do I need to speak my truth? How do I need to intervene? How do I need to step up? Step back?

One participant explained that following the leadership of people of color “doesn’t mean that we give up our agency, but it does mean that we step out of that central role.” Another participant asked the tough question of white agency:

There's something of this to me in this work around where does a white person doing this work get to be themselves, use their brain, their analysis, their thoughts, their perspective, their gifts? And where does that need to be accountable to people of color?

One participant stated a personal goal of theirs is to build their leadership development capacity and push themselves to not be so quiet and to speak up, but that it is not so easy:

Early in our stages of recognizing our whiteness, we shut up and sit in the back and don't say anything, never disagree, and often don't say anything at all...I'm in the process of pushing myself, so I cannot be so quiet and speak up. And it's really hard because sometimes I think I have slipped back into taking up too much room and it's just a constant navigation and I really never know where I'm at.

These reflections reveal an awareness among most participants that to be accountable and ultimately to be effective in leadership, they must act from a place of humility. This humility is in knowing that they will make mistakes, and to let go of this fear of error, imperfection and loss of “good white person” status and be open to vulnerability, criticism and feedback while not

silence themselves in the process. “Part of it is also having humility in terms of times that I fucked up, times I didn't speak up, and I didn't step forward, and oh, crap moment that I should have done” said one participant. Another participant explained:

There's a sense of in which I think humility is a good guidepost, which does not mean complete abdication of everything that you think, know and believe. But does say, ‘be open to hearing how other people are responding to it and think about it.’

Motives in Accountability

An additional research question emerged during the first interview regarding the importance of a white person’s awareness of their motives in relationship building. I realized that since it was established that whites in anti-racism work still can often operate out of a place of self-promotion, ego and approval-seeking behavior, the importance of being able to question where one’s motives are rooted is critical in being ‘accountable’. To be accountable to oneself and others requires examining how and why you are seeking relationships, especially in interracial relationships. Three of the participants discussed the idea of intent versus impact in regard to this question. While individuals may have well intentioned motivations to build relationships, those actions may have detrimental effects on the individuals or communities with whom they’re trying to build these relationships. One participant explained that “it is possible to be unintentionally manipulative, and it is possible to really disempower people unintentionally.” They also noted that even if you reach the desired impact, but your motivations in seeking it were off, true accountability and authenticity isn’t there.

Being aware of one’s inherent ego and deeper motives of self-promotion and self-validation as a white person were also mentioned by a few participants, aligning similarly with the propensity for even white anti-racists to unconsciously act in self-righteous motives and

behaviors (ECCW, 2007) with one participant directly noting, “I think we're foolish if we think the ego doesn't matter.” They also expressed their concern and awareness of self-validation as a subconscious motive in relationship building, posing interrogations of “who am I building relationships with and why them? How much of that is just self-justification of the way that I see the work needs to be done and finding other people who validate me versus letting yourself be challenged?” How are we aware if the voices and opinions we validate are not only done so because they justify the answers we want to receive? And to what degree are we able to discern this on our own? Our capacity to self-diagnose our own motives, especially in the moment, is tricky given we harbor much of it subconsciously. Through the interviews, it became clear that an approach that participants use in ego-checking themselves is in their ability and willingness to critically self-interrogate and self-examine. One participant explained:

I think it's really important to try to be continually questioning your motives around am I using the person as a transactional? Is this about me or is this really about them or an us?... I do think it's really important to be constantly making sure that you're not just using people for your own credentials, for your own self-justifications, the savior complex is one very common way that we talk about some of that... I think we need to be sure that we are, as sure as we can, that our relationships are not purely driven by that need for self-validation.

Another participant stated:

We each still have our need for our sense of belonging, and our own ego, wanting to be liked, wanting to be appreciated or acknowledged. So, I think part of it is understanding those motives and figuring out why I may need an affirmation and where's that coming from and how is it centering myself instead of centering a relationship?

This same participant believed we should look at our moving within the different racial identity development phases to be observant of varying motives that may be at play, depending from which phase the person is operating. They noted how earlier on in the work, a person may be more motivated by numbers of relationships or breadth, but that later, they grow to seek depth in their relationships. Edwards (2006) speaks on the increasing complexities of underlying motivations individuals experience that are central to racial identity development and central to an individual's effectiveness in anti-racism work; from "self-interest to altruistic to blended underlying motivation" (p. 43) as well as Goodman's self-interest continuum experienced as "dependence to independence to interdependence" (as cited by Edwards, 2006, p. 43).

As discussed earlier, ulterior or ill-sought motives in relationship building, no matter how unintentional or subconscious, can cause undue harm. If deep self-work is not done, and not done continuously to examine themselves, white people, even those in anti-racism, can unknowingly act with self-centered motives at the expense of a person or community of color's time, safety, energy, and overall capacity. Multiple participants noted the fine line between genuine, transparent relationship building and white people tokenizing, burdening, relying on people of color to teach them, conducting transactional relationships, and seeking approval to be told what a 'good white person' they are. As one participant put it:

That's the dangerous part of accountability or the unconstructive part of accountability is when we're the kind of white people that are just looking to people tell me what to do and tell me if I'm being good... it puts the burden back on people of color. And, then white people are abdicating their responsibility.

Another participant made the point that "not every black person wants to talk about race all the time, so you can't generalize that criteria." Making such an assumption wrongly assumes all

people of color are interested or comfortable talking to white people about race. When describing their experience in interracial relationship building in anti-racism activism, one participant said:

There's certainly a tendency for a white person to be like, and I've done this myself, absolutely, approached a person of color to be like, 'will you be my friend? my mentor? someone who I can develop this relationship with?', and recognizing afterwards, or even in the moment of that, 'wow, this is a very transactional' and 'I want you to help me understand race better as a person of color' like that being the sort of foundation of the relationship is really contrived and ultimately unhelpful.

Whereas another participant stated nearly the opposite. That they, having worked predominantly in white spaces given their work directly in white anti-racism, had approached someone who now is a close friend with a very honest request where they divulged where they were working through, and were looking to build relationships, and asked if this person would be willing to have a conversation. As the participant said, "if you break it down what I did was I was vulnerable... I think that I would like for accountability, to still have that sense of openness to it, that it's not just this list of rules."

Accountability Dynamics

The largest take away for me from this research was the immense complexity and contextual dynamics that are constantly at play in accountability. There are, as one participant said, "splinters all over the place and not everybody agrees." Almost all of the participants used words like "tricky", "complex", "nuanced", "messy", and "complicated" to describe accountability, what it means, and what it looks like. There are so many questions that arise, from what does appropriate accountability look like in a particular situation, who should you be accountable to, why accountable to this person but not another, who's opinion am I accountable

to, what's the context of the relationship, what's the level of risk involved, who do I want to have certain levels of vulnerability with, etc. The situational and contextual assessments are almost endless, and yet, there are decisions to be made and actions to be taken.

To say accountability is situational states that accountability, what it means, and what it looks like, are highly dependent on the context of a situation. It is dependent on where the people are, who is involved, the depth and dynamics of the relationships involved, and the levels of risk and power that are at stake, among many other factors. There is also the awareness that the actions and interpretations with one person will land differently with another person. As one participant explained, "someone else will experience me differently than I experience myself, another person will experience it differently than the other person says." The fact that it is contextual and situational does leave its meaning often open to interpretation. Another participant understood that "accountability to me probably means something different than it does to you and to the next person."

Another complicated aspect of a situation, as one participant explained, is who to be accountable to in the context of their professional work spaces as a trainer. While participants discussed earlier that 'accountability to' is often to those who share a similar analysis of racism, these are pre-established relationships. However, if you are operating in a role that moves you in and out of various spaces, such as a consultant, that ability to develop relationships is not there and one must act in the moment:

We did a yearlong project where half of the people in the room were people of color, and half of the people that were resistant to what we were doing were people of color. There were lots of like, young white people were like, "let's have the conversation" and there are people of color like, "I want to talk about race, can we just be colorblind?", and I was

like, “Oh...” because where people are in their racial identity development is different.

And so that's the hardest place for me, as a white person.

This participant faced the challenge of who to be accountable to in that moment – the people of color, as it is so often established in anti-racism work, even if that means not addressing structural racism, or accountable to the organization who brought them in and wants them to do this work, who may in fact be white? On a similar note, a number of participants spoke to the challenge of what to do when people of color give you different opinions and conflicting feedback. Different people have different experiences, and different opinions regarding how this work should be done, and they all have a point. One participant explained, “it gets really complicated and really messy really fast because people will define the work needed differently based on their ideology and their experiences.” Ultimately, decisions and choices are to be made. The question lies in what are you basing your choice on? One participant stated:

I have had to come to a place where I think these are my closest colleagues that I know, love and trust that see the world in a way that resonates and I'm checking in with them.

And so, these are my accountability partnership conversations.

This aligns with the earlier consensus from the research that likely the best way to navigate this diversity in opinions and the conflict that will undeniably arise is to base it off of your understanding of where this person is in their analysis of racism and their own racial identity development that has occurred. If white people try to please all people of color, they are falling into both the tokenizing the opinion of a person of color to preserve their own goodness and run from critical feedback, as well as abdicating their voice and responsibility in critical engagement and decision-making. This will require a balancing of speaking up, remaining open to feedback, assessing the various contextual factors at play, and constant self-reflection.

VI. Discussion and Conclusion

This study brought forth a more in-depth analysis of the concept of white anti-racism accountability, demonstrated general agreements of its conception among white anti-racists in the field, provided some clarity amidst the complexities, and raised warranted critiques that exist in its application. This small-scale study, while not applicable to the field at large, affirmed literature's emphasis on the importance of self-interrogation as well as collective action, whites building mutually accountable relationship with people of color as well as other whites, the necessity of personal healing so as not to perpetuate superiority and suppress others' identity development, and building accountability to a shared analysis of racism in order to ground one's work and vision effectively.

In addition, white anti-racists need be aware and honest of their underlying motives in their anti-racism work and relationship building, recognize tendencies to tokenize or reduce a diverse community in order to self-affirm or ease decision-making, understand the difference between leadership and being in charge, establish relationships with those who share a similar critical analysis of racism to ease the uncertainty of decisions among diverse opinions. White anti-racists developing relationships with other white anti-racists is an under-emphasized yet significant component of white accountability in anti-racism work; thus, white identity caucus and dialogues groups provide essential space for growth and challenging one's integrity and word in anti-racism work. In balancing all of these perspectives and doing so with humility in the knowledge that perfection is not the goal and that mistakes will occur, white anti-racists can work to show up in non-oppressive and harmful ways.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Consent form

Research Title: Dissecting Accountability in White Anti-Racism Organizing

Advisor: Bruce Dayton (bruce.dayton@sit.edu) Executive Director, CONTACT Associate Professor and Chair; Peace and Justice Leadership

Researcher: Kate Wooldridge, Intercultural Leadership and Management, PIM 76
kathryn.wooldridge@gmail.com (703) 819-4369

Purpose of Study: You are being asked to participate in a research study conducted by SIT Graduate Institute's Master's candidate Kate Wooldridge. Before deciding to participate, please read this form carefully so you can understand why the research is being conducted and what your participation will involve. Signing this consent form is not a contract or permanent commitment of participation. You will have the right to withdraw your participation or revise and/or remove your contributions at any point before the final presentation of the research. This research, which is a part of my capstone requirements for a Master's Degree from SIT, aims to explore accountability within white anti-racism work, how accountability is understood in various contexts, especially personal and interpersonal, and the challenges and criticisms of it. Through this research I hope to strengthen my future practices in this field and deepen my awareness of these issues.

2. Procedures: You will be asked to participate in one interview, lasting approximately half an hour to one hour in length. These interviews will take place via Skype, phone call, or in person (depending on feasibility). As a participant, you will be asked a series of pre-determined questions through a one-on-one interview. These questions will focus on your understanding of accountability as a white person within anti-racism work. Interviews will be recorded for transcribing purposes and you may inform me at any time if you wish to redact anything that has been shared.

3. Risks and Harm: This study and its procedures will not expose participants to any harm, physical or otherwise. It is nonetheless important that you take any necessary measures for your self-care, comfort and safety while participating.

4. Confidentiality: Every effort will be made by the researcher to preserve your confidentiality. Data collected from you, including insights, reflections and tape-recorded answers, will remain in the personal possession of the researcher and stored on a password protected device. The data will not be disseminated and will be used solely for the completion of the research.

5. Contact Information: If you have questions at any time about this study, please contact the researcher, the assigned academic advisor, or SIT's Institutional Review Board, respectively at kathryn.wooldridge@mail.sit.edu, bruce.dayton@sit.edu, and irb@sit.edu.

6. Voluntary Participation: As a reminder, your participation is voluntary and you have the right to deny participation, refuse any questions, and withdraw at any point. If you wish to withdraw yourself or your information from the research study please reach out at any time, this will not affect the relationship you have, if any, with the researcher.

7. Consent:

Please type/write a YES/NO response after the statements below.

a. I have read this document in its entirety.	
b. I have had the opportunity to ask questions about information that was unclear to me.	
c. I understand the provided information and my rights as a research participant.	
d. I understand my participation is voluntary and that I have the ability to withdraw at any time, without providing a reason for withdrawal.	

I understand the contents above and I agree to participate in the study. I acknowledge that I am 18 years of age or older.

Signature: _____

Date: _____

I give my consent for the interview to be recorded.

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix B: Research Interview Questions

Semi-structured interviews with the below pre-set questions will be conducted. The interviews will be open-ended, allowing for conversations to flow as they may with the questions below for introduction to the interview and guidance. Questions are predominantly separated into three phases of questions: the first entailing overview questions around you and your profession, the second entailing the concept of 'accountability' and the third entailing questions around the 'application of accountability':

Overview

- Name, age, location.
- How would you define the work that you do?
- For how many years have you done this work?
- What are the demographics of the groups in which you are currently work?
- What are your personal goals in your work (understanding context dependent)?

Conceptual Questions

- How do you understand the concept of accountability?
- What is its place in anti-racism work?
- What does personal accountability look like to you?
- How do you understand interpersonal accountability?

Relationship Building & Challenges Questions

- What challenges do you face around accountability?
- What is the importance of the understanding approach/motives in accountability and relationship building?
- What do authentic or transparent relationships look like?
- Are there any further questions that arose for you that I did not ask?