MUTUAL VULNERABILITY: DEEPENING HUMAN INTERCONNECTEDNESS IN CROSS-RACIAL RELATIONSHIPS

by

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my father, Anh P. Dong, who taught me the most important lesson in life. After fleeing to the United States from a war-torn Vietnam, my father tried to secure a home for his family of four, soon to be family of five. When a military officer informed my father that he found a Black couple willing to sponsor us, but that we would probably not want to live with them, my father responded that they are human too.

This work is dedicated to my mother, Que M. Dong, who I have always believed gives my father the strength and courage to be who he is.

This work is dedicated to the participants who made many sacrifices in their lives in order to engage in this inquiry process.

Finally, this work is dedicated to every individual who walks this earth and who deserves to live a life as fully human, regardless of their age, size, gender, race, ethnicity, preference or opinion.

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To all humans out there, both friends and strangers, for inspiring me to be curious about your lived experiences. May they continue to be diverse from each other, but accepted, welcomed, valued, and appreciated all the same.

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ABSTRACT

Unnecessary acts of hate and violence permeate our society due to misunderstandings between racial and ethnic groups. It is no longer appropriate to claim we live in a post-racial society. An intentional study which can inform us about the potential for increasing feelings of interconnectedness when individuals from different races and ethnicities are reciprocally vulnerable with each other is needed. Setting the stage for these specific relationship-building conditions has the potential to break down emotional barriers and could lead to a new kind of human interconnectedness across races and ethnicities. Leveraging one's vulnerability and accepting this vulnerability before others can result in a transformative interconnected experience in the context of cross-racial relationships. Heron (1996) refers to this as "transformation of personhood" (p. 38) whereby we grow personally as we develop both our interpersonal and intrapersonal skills. Certain authors reviewed in the literature foreground vulnerability as an essential human condition (D'Agnese, 2017; Meyer, Le Fevre, & Robinson, 2016; Petherbridge, 2016; Rozmarin, 2017). Mutual vulnerability can help us to begin turning toward each other in reciprocally supportive ways, rather than away from each other in individually or institutionally destructive ways (Bagnoli, 2016; Brown, 2012; Giese & Thiel, 2014; Guishard, 2009; Gunaratnam, 2011; Haugland et al., 2017; Ito & Bligh, 2017; Petherbridge, 2016; McKinnon & Greenberg, 2017; Rowland, 2016; Rozmarin, 2017). Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative study is an exploration of mutual

vulnerability in order to determine its potential for deepening human interconnectedness across diverse races and ethnicities.

I. INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

After the fall of Saigon into communist hands in 1975, my family immigrated to the United States where my father told a White military officer at the refugee camp that we are all human. This was in response to the officer's comments that we probably would not want to live with a Black family, even though they were willing to sponsor us. It has been more than forty years now since that moment and I find that as a society we are still not treating each other as humans. Our world is inevitably and increasingly inhabited by an array of diverse peoples and according to Frey (2014), the demographic landscape in America has been shifting toward Whites becoming the minority population. These shifts can be attributed to several factors such as the rise in immigration and changes in the labor market (Warren, 2017).

As the world becomes more globalized, it would seem that humans would be capable of living cooperatively because we value the unique contributions of each particular race or ethnicity. However, as the media coverage and ongoing events in our world illustrate, our desire or capacity to connect with others does not always extend to those who are different from us. In June 2011, three White teenagers attacked and beat an African American man in the name of White power (Tyner, 2016). In February of 2012, a Black teenager was killed after being shot by a Hispanic man, raising issues of implicit bias (Lee, 2013). In August 2012, a man linked to White supremacy groups killed six and wounded three Sikh worshippers (Thobani, 2012). Add to that the deaths of unarmed Black males such as Michael Brown, Eric Garner and Tamir Rice in 2014, Freddie Gray in 2015, Philando Castile in 2016, and Stephon Clark in 2018 at the hands of police who are sworn to protect rather than harm. Unfortunately, as peoples who

represent varying races or ethnicities continue to share the same spaces, it is a fear and mistrust of difference rather than an appreciation for it that tears us apart from each other. In our growingly divided society, a more thorough exploration of how to overcome the fear and mistrust is warranted.

Background of the Study

Numerous efforts have been made in a wide array of contexts to address this lack of understanding and escalating tension between Whites and other races or ethnicities. Various articles and studies have attempted to advance intergroup dialogues in the hopes of creating spaces for discussion and healing (Alimo, 2012; Becker, Wright, Lubensky, & Zhou, 2013; Case, 2012; Lee, 2016; McGloin, 2015; Yeung, Spanierman, & Landrum-Brown, 2013). Communities have organized around the concept of allyship in support of solidarity with all races (Boutte & Jackson, 2014; Brown & Ostrove, 2013; Came & Griffith, 2017; Greenberg, 2014; Michael & Conger, 2009; Patel, 2015; Waters, 2010). Higher education systems have sought to improve multicultural education programs for aspiring school teachers and administrators (Buehler, Gere, Dallavis, & Haviland, 2009; Carjuzaa & Abercrombie, 2008; Lonnquist, RB-Banks, & Huber, 2009; Pang, Stein, Gomez, Matas, & Shimogori, 2011; Vogel, 2011) and K-12 public school systems have instituted cultural competence programs (Bakken & Smith, 2011; Ezzani & Brooks, 2015; Hines, 2008; West-Olatunji, Goodman, & Shure, 2011; Wright Jr. & Harris, 2010; Yull, Blitz, Thompson, & Murray, 2014). Professionals in various roles have been mandated to participate in multicultural training (Case, 2015; Spanierman, Poteat, Whittaker, Schlosser, & Arevalo Avalos, 2017; Spanierman & Smith, 2017). Dialogue, allyship, educational programs, and workplace training are insufficient as long as the

adults participating in these endeavors are not being asked to look inside of themselves to uncover their most vulnerable thoughts around their cross-racial interactions or relationships. Without an avenue to explore the inherent vulnerability required when it comes to effectively engaging with individuals from different races and ethnicities, fear and mistrust will continue to guide our behaviors in an ongoing cycle of implicit and explicit bias, further perpetuating racialized hate and violence.

Rationale for the Study

Leveraging one's vulnerability and accepting this vulnerability before others can result in a transformative experience in the context of cross-racial relationships. Gilson provides one definition of vulnerability:

> Vulnerability is a condition of potential that makes it possible for us to suffer; to fall prey to violence and be harmed, but also to fall in love, to learn, to take pleasure and find comfort in the presence of others, and to experience the simultaneity of these feelings. Vulnerability is not just a condition that limits us but also one that can enable us. (as cited in Bailey, 2011, p. 480)

For the purpose of this study, vulnerability will be defined from an assets-based mindset as a tool that will advance our ability to interconnect with others from different races and ethnicities. Only through a willingness to look deeply within ourselves can individuals discover whether existing social practices advance or inhibit our capacity to positively connect with others across races. This introspection is a step that is often missing in attempts to create a space for positive cross-racial relationships (Barnett, 2011; Buehler, Gere, Dallavis & Haviland, 2009; Campbell Jones, Campbell Jones, & Lindsey, 2010; Case, 2012; Ezzani & Brooks, 2015; Greenberg, 2014; McGloin, 2015).

The prevailing thought that emerges from the literature is in line with this assets-based viewpoint. Brown (2012) offers a definition of vulnerability as "uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure" (p. 34) and adds that it is "the core, the heart, the center, of meaningful human experiences" (p. 12). This definition primarily resides in the social sciences, which are the overarching fields for my research. Certain authors reviewed in the literature foreground vulnerability as an essential human condition (D'Agnese, 2017; Meyer, Le Fevre, & Robinson, 2016; Petherbridge, 2016; Rozmarin, 2017). Other authors additionally situate vulnerability as a resource with capacity for freedom (Hinton, 2016), a step toward greater confidence and maturity (Haugland, Lassen & Giske, 2018), a springboard for creativity (Finn, 2015) or for reconciliation (Rozmarin, 2017). Perhaps Wu (2013) summed it up best by describing vulnerability as "potentiality of the world's unending renewal" (p. 56). These predominant views of vulnerability as a resource with potential furnish hope by illustrating how humans can leverage it in ways that permit them to interconnect productively and generatively with others.

I was able to locate three articles in the literature which addressed vulnerability as a resource in the context of cross-racial relationships (Bhattacharya, 2016; Hill, 2017; Shim, 2017). However, in terms of actual research studies, I could only locate two that explored vulnerability, and they were not in the context of cross-racial relationships. Those are sparse and almost nonexistent. In one of those studies, findings revealed that flourishing, defined as a favorable state of well-being and human functioning, increases social competence and decreases one's sense of vulnerability (Uysal, 2015) . The researcher conducted this study using three instruments to measure university students' social competence, social functioning and psychological vulnerability. Results suggested

that overcoming vulnerability is positively correlated with an individual's ability to flourish as a human being. Although the findings support the proposed research, the participants were solely from Turkey. This is a limitation since the participants only represent the population of a single country. Additionally, the researcher's decision to rely on the participants completing multiple surveys without other ways to triangulate data impact the trustworthiness of said data. As with any study where participants are asked to self-report, this should be explicitly stated as a limitation.

The second study sought to determine whether educational leaders demonstrate vulnerability in difficult conversations within the work context to resolve conflicts, Meyer, Le Fevre, and Robinson (2017) found that participants primarily were not able to be vulnerable in the dialogue which could have led to trust-building in the relationship and resolution of the conflict. Participants responded to a questionnaire, and the researchers included in their article participants' comments demonstrating negative views toward their conversation partner. Although the potential of vulnerability was explored, the study seemed to only superficially evaluate its impact on interpersonal relationships. Follow up studies are needed as a deeper dive to investigate the perceptions around why these negative views exist when interacting with others. One way to improve this study would be to ask participants to self-reflect about their reasons for having these negative views toward their colleagues. According to both these studies, vulnerability as an essential human condition can be leveraged toward a more optimistic positioning where it carries the potential to positively influence our relationships through flourishing and trust-building. My study can extend this research base since I, along with the

participants, will be expressing my vulnerability in the context of cross-racial relationships to explore its potential for increasing feelings of human interconnectedness.

Definition of Key Terms

It is important to define the key terms and constructs: vulnerability, mutual vulnerability, human interconnectedness and cross-racial relationship. For the purposes of this study, I draw on the work of Brown (2012) to define *vulnerability* as "uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure" (p. 34), further qualified as "the core, the heart, the center, of meaningful human experiences" (p. 12). The work of Brown (2012) and Bagnoli (2016) provide the definition for *mutual vulnerability* as our reliance on each other during shared activities to embrace uncertainty, take risks and face emotional exposure. I further draw on the work of Rozmarin (2017) to define *interconnectedness* as a "human condition of mutual dependence and a quest for comfort and well-being" (p. 554). And finally, using the work of Barrett-Lennard (2007), the definition of a *cross-racial relationship* is "an essential primary phenomenon of human life" (p. 185) that occurs between two or more individuals from different races. Although race conveys the socially constructed term used in our current reality, it is important to distinguish that ethnicity of the individuals is how participants will be recruited for the study.

Statement of the Problem

As humans, we want to feel connection with others. Part of being human is engaging in enriching relationships with those around us and sharing in the connectedness that we naturally seek. D'Agnese (2017) demonstrated through the theories of Dewey and Heidegger that humans from the very beginning are subjects embedded in the world alongside others. Despite the risk of exposure to harm (Bagnoli,

2016), or the discomfort of not being certain of outcomes (D'Agnese, 2017), or the fear of being exploited (Holland, 2018), humans live in a world subjected to others' subjectivities (Kelchtermans, 2015; Laufer & Santos, 2017; Petherbridge, 2016; Rozmarin, 2017; Shim, 2017; Uysal, 2015; Wu, 2013). As such, research is much needed in the area of vulnerable expression to help individuals from different races or ethnicities collectively and meaningfully connect with one another while navigating this intersubjectivity that spreads like a gulf between them. Racially and ethnically diverse groups need a legitimate pathway for expression of their deeply rooted fears and mistrust when it comes to engaging with those different from them. If fear and mistrust are factors that hinder racially and ethnically diverse individuals from connecting with each other, we need an approach that will reframe these negative emotions into more productive and generative mindsets. Such efforts could improve cross-racial relationships across the Black and White divide (Granger, 2002; Rawlins, 2009), in the field of counseling as it pertains to cultural competence (Okech & Champe, 2008) and with regards to improved health (Page-Gould, Mendoza-Denton, & Mendes, 2014). Vulnerability can be a tool toward this end. Enacting vulnerability can target the emotional barriers that contribute to a lack of understanding between people from different races and ethnicities. By enacting vulnerability in this study, I had to lay bare my feelings when it comes to interacting with racially different others and be completely honest about my feelings in those situations. Being vulnerable requires that people face their fear and embrace a state of uncertainty and unknowing (Brown, 2012). Prevailing contemporary literature portrays vulnerability as a strength and not a weakness as historically and traditionally conceived. In order to foster human interconnectedness

between diverse peoples, vulnerability can be leveraged to help individuals explore their fears and mistrust around interacting with those who are different. Mutual vulnerability can help us to begin turning toward each other in reciprocally supportive ways, rather than away from each other in individually or institutionally destructive ways (Bagnoli, 2016; Brown, 2012; Giese & Thiel, 2014; Guishard, 2009; Gunaratnam, 2011; Haugland et al., 2017; Ito & Bligh, 2017; Petherbridge, 2016; McKinnon & Greenberg, 2017; Rowland, 2016; Rozmarin, 2017).

It is no longer appropriate to claim we live in a post-racial society. More intentional studies are in order which can inform us about the potential when individuals from different races and ethnicities are reciprocally vulnerable with each other. Setting the stage for these specific relationship-building conditions has the potential to break down emotional barriers and could lead to a new kind of human interconnectedness across races and ethnicities.

Purpose of the Study

The intent of this study was an exploration of mutual vulnerability in order to uncover and determine its potential for deepening feelings of human interconnectedness across diverse races and ethnicities.

Research Questions

Inspired by the theories around vulnerability and interconnectedness, this exploratory and descriptive qualitative study sought to delve into the overarching topic: *the individual and collective experiences of mutual vulnerability toward deepening feelings of human interconnectedness in cross-racial relationships.* Owing to the chosen methodology as collaborative human inquiry, which insists on the participants serving as

co-inquirers with decision-making capacity throughout the inquiry process, the research questions were not formalized prior to the study. Once the study began and the co-inquirers engaged in a group activity to determine the research question, we were able to generate the following query: How do we use vulnerability to explore and express our deep-rooted fears and mistrust in a way that draws out courage for the reciprocation of that vulnerability? We also generated the following sub-questions. What are those fears? What are commonalities in how we practice vulnerability? How can these commonalities help us move beyond our fears and increase our feelings of interconnectedness in cross-racial contexts? The activities in which we engaged to arrive at these questions will be explained in more detail in chapter 4.

Philosophy of Inquiry

A constructivist approach frames this study where meaning is perceived as subjective and derived from social and historical experiences (Creswell, 2013). Through interactions with others, the participants sought to make sense of their world in the context of cross-racial relationships by actively exploring and embracing their vulnerability before others. Social constructionism is then evoked from this "interactive human community" (Crotty, 1998, p. 55). As the initiating researcher, I was aware that my own epistemological worldview is not wholly separate from theirs. My objective was to interpret how they attempted to construct meaning from their willingness to explore their vulnerability in a collective setting, which is the theory that drove this study (Brown, 2012). From an axiological standpoint, individual beliefs and values were honored during the group interactions and mediated through a shared commitment to mutual vulnerability. I also shared in this commitment to be vulnerable so that

participants could have a model for what it looks like to take risks, embrace uncertainty, and face emotional disclosure. Acknowledging these diverse ways of knowing and making sense of the world characterizes a constructionist view of the nature of reality as harnessing both objective and subjective tendencies (Crotty, 1998). Since social constructionism does not permit the existence of one true interpretation of experiences, participants were able to simultaneously demonstrate objectivity and subjectivity in their construction of meaning around their experiences of vulnerability. As such, social constructionism, provided a conceptual framework highly amenable to the chosen methodology for the study, a hybrid version of co-operative inquiry (Heron, 1996) and collaborative inquiry (Bray, Lee, Smith & Yorks, 2000; Group for Collaborative Inquiry, 1994). Co-operative inquiry is defined as "a form of participative, person-centered inquiry which does research with people not on them or about them" (Heron, 1996, p. 19). Some hallmark features of co-operative inquiry include participants as co-researchers with full decision-making capacity, a balance between action and reflection, and a focus on the full range of sensibilities of the participants. Collaborative inquiry stems from co-operative inquiry and is a term which grants "more flexibility to develop our projects with those with whom we were collaboratively engaging in inquiry" (Bray et al., 2000, p. 5). For this same reason of increased flexibility, I prefer the *collaborative inquiry* term, but have inserted the word *human* to capture the very human essence of vulnerability and interconnectedness. Additionally, I prefer the term *co-inquirers* to indicate that as the principal researcher I maintain full responsibility for the study.

Theoretical Perspective

Vulnerability as a theory provides the perspective framing this study. In order to understand how the enactment of vulnerability might enhance an individual's ability to have meaningful connections and relationships with others from different races or ethnicities, I designed the study based on prominent theories of vulnerability that were assets-based in nature. I am highlighting two scholars in particular who advocate for vulnerability as a resource for positive change in how we interact with one another. Brown's (2010) theory of vulnerability rests on the necessary components of "uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure" (p. 34). Furthermore, she describes vulnerability as the "the birthplace of joy, creativity, belonging, love" (Brown, 2010). It follows that if we learn to embrace uncertainty, take risks, and emotionally expose ourselves to another, we may expand our opportunities for feelings of joy and belonging.

Rozmarin's (2017) theory of vulnerability is more closely associated with the world of politics than of social sciences, but it is useful for its ontological conception of vulnerability. For her, vulnerability has the transformative capacity to move us as humans from conflict to reconciliation. "Ontological vulnerability is also a condition of people's ability to care deeply for others and share a world with others" (p. 550). These two theoretical perspectives on vulnerability relate to the purpose of the study. In order to explore vulnerability and mutual vulnerability, the participants and I will be engaging in vulnerable behaviors as described by Brown (2012) under the assumption that this will lead to deeper feelings of human interconnectedness, or love and belonging. As we engage in vulnerable research actions throughout the study, we will see whether

vulnerability helps us learn to care more deeply for those with whom we share our world, in particular with those who are racially or ethnically different from us.

Significance of the Study

This study contributes to the theory and practice of vulnerability in cross-racial relationships. By leveraging vulnerability, and mutual vulnerability, as a resource rather than a weakness, there is potential for greater human interconnectedness between individuals of different races and ethnicities. I will elaborate in depth on the significance for theory and practice in the final chapter.

Chapter Summary

This chapter serves as the introduction to the study with an overview of the background, rationale, purpose, and significance for engaging in collaborative human inquiry which seeks to explore how mutual vulnerability, and the individual and collective experiences thereof, can deepen feelings of human interconnectedness in cross-racial relationships. In order to combat the uncertainty, mistrust, or fear which exists between individuals of different races or ethnicities, we must create conditions that set the stage for such barriers to be eradicated and for such relationships to be renewed. Leveraging one's vulnerability, one's capacity to accept uncertainty, take risks, and face emotional exposure, is one way to do so. By demonstrating how human interconnectedness is possible between individuals who do not share a common racial or ethnic background, a link was established between vulnerability and meaningful cross-racial relationships, with awareness of self as the mediating phenomenon. The significance of this linkage resides in the potential contributions to the field of adult education by illustrating how the use collaborative human inquiry, along with our

recommended tool for changed practice, can create conditions for authentic and mutually vulnerable conversations around race among racially and ethnically different individuals. The overall potential is transformation of our interpersonal practices with diverse others in a more accepting way that restores humanity.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

In our society at large, there are increasing incidents of misunderstandings (at best) and violence (at worst) stemming from racial tensions (Barnett, 2011; Ezzani & Brooks, 2015; Greenberg, 2014; Reason, Scales, & Roosa Millar, 2005; Spanierman, Poteat, Whittaker, Schlosser, & Arevalo Avalos, 2017; Talwar, 2015). Efforts have been made toward developing cultural competence, or cultural proficiency, with the goal of seeking to help individuals learn how to interact effectively with others who do not share similar backgrounds across social, racial or cultural boundaries (Ballenger & Ninness, 2013; Lonnquist, RB-Banks, & Huber, 2009; Pang, Stein, Gomez, Matas, & Shimogori, 2011). In order for these efforts to meet with success, we first must be willing to engage in an introspective journey that requires us to self-examine our current socializing practices. Only through a willingness to self-reflect can individuals discover whether existing practices advance or inhibit our capacity to positively connect with others across races. This introspection is a step that is often missing in attempts to create a space for positive cross-racial relationships. Prior literature reviews have exposed how a lack of critical self-reflection on the part of individuals striving toward intercultural competence only leads to superficial outcomes that are neither authentic in depth nor sustained in breadth (Barnett, 2011; Buehler, Gere, Dallavis & Haviland, 2009; Campbell Jones, Campbell Jones, & Lindsey, 2010; Case, 2012; Ezzani & Brooks, 2015; Greenberg, 2014; McGloin, 2015).

Within the public K-12 educational arena, one study of a school district in Texas illustrated that when teachers and administrators are not questioned about nor made to examine their biases and assumptions regarding their multicultural populations, they are

left to believe that their school practices were justified even though findings showed a lack of sensitivity toward their Muslim families (Ezzani & Brooks, 2015). In postsecondary education programs that prepare aspiring teachers, the multicultural training available for students to teach culturally and linguistically diverse students does not adequately address the affective needs of new teachers. With an overemphasis on instructional pedagogy, such educational preparation programs are not adequately providing in-service teachers with necessary opportunities to reflect on the emotional challenges of teaching students who do not resemble their own racial backgrounds (Buehler, Gere, Dallavis, & Haviland, 2009). Students in colleges and universities continue to grow in diversity and multicultural classrooms are on the rise. One study revealed how a professor felt when confronted with students "with identities, values, faiths, beliefs, and myths unlike those of mainstream America, they—we—are woefully ill-prepared" (Creaser, 2010, p.1). Within the community, there are various efforts toward increasing intercultural competence through the use of affinity groups and interracial dialogues. However, Spanierman and Smith (2017) problematize the absence of addressing "the emotional nature of the work" (p. 612) and propose "the experience of vulnerability as an important component" (p. 612) for any peer group seeking to foster productive conversations leading to improved relations between different races and cultures. Thus, a survey of the literature for successful attempts in developing positive cross-racial relationships across multiple contexts points to the need for more self-reflection, as well as the enactment of vulnerability, as key components in order to achieve the social change desired.

In order to foreground this crucial need to look inward, I sought to examine the extant literature with an eye focused on the concept of vulnerability and how it influences an individual's ability to meaningfully connect with others across the racial divides. In other words, how might vulnerability advance or hinder an individual's ability to have meaningful connections and relationships with others from different races or ethnicities? The searches for relevant literature were based on a variety of queries. The most fruitful query resulted in searching under "personal vulnerability" and "personal vulnerability and relationships". Although utilizing the words "kinds of vulnerability" produced an abundant number of results, the authors of these potential sources were focused on taxonomies of vulnerability, which were not all directly aligned with my research goal. A combination of terms such as "vulnerability and race relationships", "social vulnerability and race", "vulnerability and cross-racial relationships" did result in additional resources that were relevant to the purposes of the current research topic. However, the method which seemed to elicit the most notable sources consisted of following the scholarly trail of embedded citations within relevant articles. Being attuned to the research as cited by authors who focused on vulnerability within the specific context that I needed was an indispensable way of discovering relevant literature.

A preliminary review of the research revealed a vast range of types of vulnerability experienced by humans, listed by chronological order in which they were introduced: *relevant vulnerabilities* versus *genuine vulnerabilities* (Logar, 2010), *cultural vulnerability* in the context of intercultural social work (Gunaratnam, 2011), vulnerabilities that are *inherent, situational* and *pathogenic* or which can fall under the categories of *dispositional vulnerability* or *occurrent vulnerability* (Rogers & Lange,

2013), *psychological vulnerability* (Uysal, 2015), *personal vulnerability* (Hinton, 2016; Rowland, 2016), *embodied vulnerability* as a pedagogical strategy (Hill, 2017), *social vulnerability* and *physical vulnerability* (Laufer & Santos, 2017), *emotional vulnerability* within the context of couples (McKinnon & Greenberg, 2017), *epistemic vulnerability* (Meyer, Le Fevre & Robinson, 2017), *contextual* versus *ontological vulnerability* (Rozmarin, 2017), and *human vulnerability* within the nursing field (Haugland, Lassen & Giske, 2018). Perhaps the most detailed taxonomy on vulnerability is proposed by Petherbridge (2016) who offers a bevy of various types of vulnerability among which are *corporeal vulnerability, heightened vulnerability, primary vulnerability, surplus vulnerability,* and *common* versus *situational vulnerability.* The vulnerabilities that are relevant to my research will be explicated throughout the chapter.

Although there exists a complex taxonomy of vulnerability presented in the literature, there are fewer definitions of vulnerability in and of itself. However, it was possible to define vulnerability in two distinct ways that depend on the context to which it will be applied. The most familiar manner of conceiving of vulnerability has to do with the exposure to harm. According to the *Encyclopedia of Crisis Management*, vulnerability "represents the potential for harm incurred by a person, asset, activity, or assemblage of items that is at risk" (Alexander, 2013, p. 981). This definition can pertain to many fields such as politics, environmental science or communication studies. Another way of defining vulnerability suggests a different connotation. Brown (2012) offers a definition of vulnerability as "uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure" (p. 34) and adds that it is "the core, the heart, the center, of meaningful human experiences" (p. 12). This definition primarily resides in the social sciences, which is the overarching

field for my research. For the intents and purposes of the stated research topic and questions, vulnerability in this additive sense acknowledges its positive aspects and was most suitable to the proposed study.

In addition to the literature bringing to light the various typologies and definitions of vulnerability, there are many viewpoints expressed in the extant scholarship that were equally aligned with the research topic. Stemming from these multiple perspectives to be addressed in the next section, this review of current scholarship resulted in two principle themes: personal vulnerability and vulnerability before others. Each theme is comprised of an array of subthemes that underscores and outlines its distinguishing elements. In sharing the evidence found in the literature for each major theme, my aim was to illustrate how healthy embracing of personal vulnerability can assist in productively leveraging one's emotional vulnerability and how accepting this vulnerability before others can result in a transformative mutual vulnerability.

A discussion of human interconnectedness will follow to address what the literature has revealed concerning this relational concept. Emergent themes situate interconnectedness at the universal and global level before touching on relatedness and relationships, followed by attention given to the affective dimension of being interconnected, which lead to mutual comfort and well-being as the salient constitutive features. Cross-racial relationships will also be highlighted to unveil their presence in the literature in terms of their predictors and possibilities, the benefits, as well as the nature and quality and considerations thereof in order to set the stage for infusing vulnerability and influencing interconnectedness. Ultimately, I hope to demonstrate how a healthy

emotional vulnerability can reinforce mutual vulnerability, which might in turn lead to increased feelings of human interconnectedness within cross-racial relationships.

Views on Vulnerability

Vulnerability as a Human Condition

The perception of vulnerability as an essential human condition is resonated in the work of certain authors reviewed in the literature (D'Agnese, 2017; Meyer, Le Fevre, & Robinson, 2016; Petherbridge, 2016; Rozmarin, 2017). In referencing the work of Dewey and Heidegger regarding the human condition, D'Agnese (2017) positions that although human beings are "fragile and exposed creatures" (p. 100), they are capable of acting in ways that lead to "transformation and becoming" (p. 101). Meyer et al. (2016) adheres to this condition of humans as being embedded in the world and exposed to others, and situates it in a positive light. "What is needed is a shift in thinking about failures and one's own vulnerability. Making mistakes and failures needs to be perceived as a basic human condition that enables learning" (p. 231). They advocate for *epistemic vulnerability*, which is defined as the recognition of one's fallibility leading to learning that is characterized by honesty and openness. Placing an emphasis on the intersubjectivity of humans, Petherbridge (2016) further echoes the perspective of D'Agnese.

> Understanding vulnerability as conditioned by both normativity and power highlights the fragility of intersubjective relations, but this very fragility is what requires us to work harder at cooperative forms of interrelation and normative forms of intersubjectivity. In this sense, vulnerability is a critical category that

> reveals the tensions and ambiguities as well as the richness and the perplexity of social relations. (p. 601)

Based on this conceptualization, the similarity between Petherbridge (2016) and D'Agnese (2017) is apparent. Rather than accept our embeddedness in the world as exposed and fragile, we as humans have the capacity to move beyond this initial position and transition into a place of productivity. The work of Rozmarin (2017) in linking vulnerability with reconciliation foregrounds an ontological view on vulnerability. "From this perspective, vulnerability is not only a concrete outcome of certain social conditions, but is also an ontological condition that serves as a basis for a different conceptualization of human subjectivity and agency" (Rozmarin, 2017, p. 549). The notion of agency aligns with humans enabling their learning (Meyer et al., 2016) and humans working hard toward interrelation (D'Agnese, 2017). This viewpoint can be said to offer a general philosophical perspective under which the others can be situated. In other words, if vulnerability is equated with the nature of being, then it proceeds that vulnerability is a condition to which humans are naturally subjected, but one from which humans possess the agency to transcend beyond, once fragilities and tensions are acknowledged and reconciled.

The Ambivalence of Vulnerability

As we have already seen, Petherbridge (2016) underscores the ambivalence inherent in vulnerability along the same vein as Gilson's definition. From her standpoint, "vulnerability is characterized by ambivalence in the sense that it designates neither positive nor negative states of being or forms of relationality but contains the capacity for either or both" (p. 591). The literature uncovered that not all views on vulnerability

exhibit a positive conceptualization. In fact, vulnerability was problematized in certain cases found in the literature that blur its potential as a human condition capable of transformative power. In a symposium paper on vulnerability linked with leadership, Ito and Bligh (2017) advise that "there is nothing inherently authentic or ethical about vulnerability" (p. 68). They caution that individuals in leadership positions might choose to leverage vulnerability in a self-serving manner to influence those they lead. This position underscores the ambiguities related to vulnerability, but emphasizes the fragility of humans in being exposed to others over agency. McKinnon and Greenberg (2017) further complicate this ambivalence by introducing the notion of whether there can exist too much vulnerability. In other words, they question the possibility of determining the point at which too much expression of vulnerability might generate a decrease in positive outcomes. This invokes a question regarding when an individual might know that their expression of vulnerability could threaten rather than promote intersubjectivity. Another viewpoint that surfaced in the literature which equally problematizes this ambivalence concerns that of Holland (2018), who asserts that vulnerability has been used as natural selection to marginalize Black people. "Our vulnerability is a narrative told often and always and most importantly it is chosen *for* us" (p. 204). This viewpoint starkly contrasts with the majority of perspectives presented in that the human subject does not possess agency, but is passive as vulnerability acts upon it.

The Myth of Vulnerability as Weakness

In Rozmarin's (2017) article on the role of vulnerability in peacemaking efforts between nations, vulnerability is connected to "weakness, helplessness and lack of resilience" (p. 546). Similarly, Wu (2013) states that "vulnerability is intuitively

conceived as a synonym for weakness, impotence, and victimhood, as the consequence of various institutional and social oppressions" (p. 50). Both authors initially position vulnerability in this light with the intention of subsequently showing their readers how these are misconceptions that must be eradicated in order to see vulnerability's true potential. As a response to this perception of vulnerability as being ambivalent with stronger negative associations, the literature revealed viewpoints exposing this myth of vulnerability as weakness (Brown, 2012; Uysal, 2015). Brown (2012) and her work on vulnerability criticizes the perception that being vulnerable equates with being weak. "The perception that vulnerability is weakness is the most widely accepted myth about vulnerability and the most dangerous" (p. 32). According to these sources, ambiguity associated with vulnerability as an essential human condition can be leveraged toward a more optimistic positioning where it is conceived of as a strength rather than a weakness.

Vulnerability as a Resource

Contrary to the scholarship reviewed thus far demonstrating the ambivalent and ambiguous nature of vulnerability, the prevailing view in the literature positions it as a resource with potential in a variety of contexts. Three authors situate vulnerability as a resource in the context of cross-racial relationships. In an article highlighting the use of narratives to address social inequities in postsecondary education, Bhattacharya (2016) underscores vulnerability as a strength naming it a "fertile site of intersectionality and inquiry" (p. 311). Embodied vulnerability as utilized by Hill (2017) carries the potential for breaking down assumptions as the subject uses his or her agency to proactively address any possibility of stereotypes. Shim (2017) champions vulnerability as a pedagogical tool for combating racism in the pre-service teacher classroom setting.

Within the context of leadership, one article (Hinton, 2016) and one study (Meyer et al., 2016) portray vulnerability as being advantageous. In her article on personal vulnerability as it connects with women leadership, Hinton (2016) accords vulnerability with the capacity for freedom. "By sharing vulnerability, we free ourselves while unlocking another's story, potential and leadership" (p. 34). Meyer et al. (2016), the proponents of epistemic vulnerability, fall under this category as well given their positioning of vulnerability as conducive to increased learning as a result of critical self-reflection. In the context of nursing education, vulnerability and courage are inextricably linked and viewed as a path to greater confidence and competence in the field. "By applying their vulnerability as a resource, students can experience maturation and growing courage" (Haugland, Lassen & Giske, 2018, p. 68). Despite the risk of exposure and unknowing that comes with being vulnerable, Finn (2015) champions it in the context of the creative process. "It is only those who choose to traverse the edgy territory of vulnerability who come to know the profoundly transformative power of loving deeply" (para. 4). Within the context of peacemaking between countries, Rozmarin (2017) states that learning how to manage vulnerabilities can help leaders "create a sustainable process of reconciliation" (p. 547). Wu (2013) also advocates for vulnerability to be ushered in as a new curriculum to teach humans how to prosper in this world where we are subjected to others. "Vulnerability is not something to dispel, but a rich link with the world, intimate involvement with the great process of things, and the potentiality of the world's unending renewal" (p. 56). These predominant views of vulnerability as a resource with potential furnish hope by illustrating how humans can leverage it in ways that permit them to engage productively and generatively with others.

Personal Vulnerability

One of the two principal themes emergent from the literature concerns the concept of personal, or individual, vulnerability. This idea encompasses how the self is linked to elements of being vulnerable and the challenges inherent thereof. However, the literature reveals that the self does not exist in the world without recognition of others with whom it is embedded, and by consequence, this places demands on the self to seek recognition from those others. In the following section, I will highlight how the self is enacted when engaged in acts of individual vulnerability, which is manifested through one's perceived vulnerability and a need for recognition of that vulnerability. I will also describe the efforts and the reasons that individuals employ in order to resist vulnerability, and I will counter these with opposing efforts necessary to leverage emotional vulnerability in a way that is productive and generative.

Vulnerability of the Self

In the literature, vulnerability is inextricably linked to the self (Haugland et al., 2017; Ito & Bligh, 2017; Shim, 2017; Uitto et al., 2016). In their work on vulnerability and leadership, Ito and Bligh (2017) state that vulnerability is an act of "self-awareness that requires individuals to turn an objective eye on their own behaviors" (p. 68). Unfortunately, this need to look inward is not without its challenges since being self-critical is neither intuitive nor effortless. Similarly, but in the context of professional training for nurses, students are encouraged to explore their own vulnerability by confronting any feelings which arose as a part of interacting with others from different backgrounds (Haugland et al., 2017). Two authors problematize the self-reflection that must accompany vulnerability as teachers work to connect with students from different

cultures. A study by Shim (2017) examining the ability of pre-service teachers to self-reflect on the topic of racism showed participants exhibiting frustration and confusion during their attempts to do so. An apparent problem with this study though is the limited sample of participants in terms of number and gender. Only three participants took part in the study and they were all male. The gender of the participants invokes a wondering of whether males tend to be less willing to self-reflect, especially on a topic as controversial as racism. Uitto et al. (2016) connect teacher vulnerability with self-understanding. In their advocacy of peer groups as sites for teachers to share their experiences, they discovered that asking individuals to assess long held beliefs may pose a threat to their sense of self. Although there are threats inherent to the sense of self when being vulnerable, Brown (2012) highlights how one's perceived vulnerability can be reframed in order to minimize negative feelings. She defines perceived vulnerability as "the ability to acknowledge our risks and exposure" (p. 40). From this standpoint, it is not the fact that humans are vulnerable that is the issue, but that humans have the agency to manage their vulnerability in a way that allows for positive outcomes to result. This belief in agency reinforces the prior claim that rather than simply accepting our position as fragile subjects in the world, humans have the capacity to act, as opposed to being acted upon.

As part of the journey of reflecting on our sense of self and the role this plays in being vulnerable, there is an accompanying need to be recognized by others. Recognizing the work of Butler on social vulnerability, Laufer and Santos (2017) reassert that "being recognized as a subject implies a feeling of identity that is fundamentally related to an experience of vulnerability" (p. 3). In other words, individuals look to

others to validate their identity and this is embedded within acts of vulnerability. Petherbridge (2016) similarly refers to Butler by addressing her suggestion of withholding this need for recognition, since it is the very need for it that makes us vulnerable. She rightly disaffirms this approach as counter to viewing vulnerability as a resource for connecting with others. "To wish recognition or vulnerability away is to eliminate an essential part of our being and of our sociality" (p. 598). This inherent need of the self to be received by others is echoed in the work of many authors who address and confront its challenges. In a study investigating self-disclosure, Gibson et al. (2018) theorize that individuals who disclose their weaknesses are not only enacting vulnerability, but also demonstrating their need to be supported by others. In order to test multiple hypotheses around self-disclosure and perceived vulnerability, they conducted a series of three laboratory studies each with a different focus. Their results are particularly illuminating in that they show how self-disclosure at work may have a negative impact on relationships that are situated in the context of work when there is a difference in status. One limitation concerning this study must be discussed because it does not seem to take into account multiple interpretations of commonly accepted words that were used in the surveys. For example, participants were asked to gauge the level of appropriateness of the discloser's comments and identify them as being acceptable or professional. A critique may be that there are various interpretations of what is considered professional in the work context in today's society. Appropriate work attire can be just as contested as appropriate disclosure. Continuing in the context of work, Giese and Thiel (2014) problematize the employer-employee relationship by introducing the idea of reciprocity in terms of one's vulnerability being received by the other. The

authors state that differing views on reciprocity can lead to issues of perceived inequity and complicate this relationship. Transitioning to the context of relationships among couples, a reciprocity of vulnerability and being well received by our partner is shown to assist in improving past emotional injuries. In this study conducted by McKinnon and Greenberg (2017) on vulnerable emotional expression, results indicated that a higher degree of vulnerability shown by the partner who committed the wrong was predictive of resolution. What can be problematic in this situation is what follows if both partners do not exhibit the same degree of vulnerability, especially considering the greater emotional investment. These challenges that accompany the need to be recognized by others, and that this demands an ability to manage our vulnerabilities, can be addressed by heeding the advice of Nortvedt who posits "vulnerability as an affective intentionality, a sensibility towards the other's singularity" (as cited in Rozmarin, 2017, p. 552). If humans can be intentional in their expression of vulnerability, and keep the other in mind, then humans have a greater chance of improving their social relations and elevating feelings of interconnectedness.

Resistance to Vulnerability

In their studies involving teachers, Shim (2017) and Uitto et al. (2016) have unveiled the challenges of frustration and fear that accompany attempts to demonstrate vulnerability. They are joined by Haugland et al. (2017) who described the discomfort experienced by nursing students who had to confront their own prejudices with encountering people from different backgrounds. However, upon reflection of these disorienting emotions, the students were taught to face their own vulnerability and to recognize it in others. In a similar context of professionals delivering intercultural

palliative care, Gunaratnam (2011) emphasized emotional resourcefulness as requisite for this kind of work. Using focus group interviews, she designed questions that would elicit narratives from professionals working in this specific end of life context. The analyzed narratives uncovered the need for cultural vulnerability on the part of such professionals in order to successfully negotiate differences and overcome their fears in confronting racism. Certain narrative examples highlighted a fear on the part of the caregivers to make assumptions about other cultures and inadvertently offend, counterbalanced by a fear of seeming to be ignorant if they ask too many questions. What is appreciated about the use of narratives is the qualitative approach being employed to study topics situated within sensitive contexts with a high degree of emotional components at play. What is not evident in the choice of methods is the rationale for not including the marginalized voices of those receiving the care. Switching to the work of embodied vulnerability advocated by Hill (2017), she admits the existence of discomfort in her attempts to battle stereotypes with her students, but positions it as a norm from which emerges room for possibility.

Still, the literature review exposed a stubborn preponderance to resisting vulnerability owing to these inherent challenges that are presented to the self when engaging in acts of vulnerability. The reasons for which people resist vulnerability ranged in the literature. One reason that surfaced extensively is the fear of exposure (Bailey, 2011; Bhattacharya, 2016; Brown, 2010; Brown, 2012; D'Agnese, 2017; Dobrescu, 2014; Hill, 2017; Kelchtermans, 2015; Laufer & Santos, 2017; Rozmarin, 2017; Shim, 2017; Uitto et al., 2016; Wu, 2013). Part of being vulnerable requires an acceptance of not knowing and uncertainty about future outcomes. This ability to accept

a degree of uncertainty in terms of how others will react to one's vulnerability presents another challenge and comprises a second reason that evokes resistance to vulnerability (Brown, 2010; D'Agnese, 2017; Finn, 2015; Gunaratnam, 2011; Haugland et al., 2017; Hill, 2017; Ito & Bligh, 2017; Kelchtermans, 2015; Laufer & Santos, 2017; Meyer et al., 2016; Shim, 2017; Uitto et al., 2016; Wu, 2013). Feelings of shame (Bailey, 2011; Brown, 2010; Brown, 2012; Gunaratnam, 2011; Tsai, 2016) and worries about fallibility (Meyer et al., 2016; Rowland, 2016) constitute additional reasons which prevent individuals from accepting and embracing their vulnerability.

Resistance or avoidance to vulnerability assumed many forms in the scholarship. One way that was exposed in the literature is to enact invulnerability. In her work on White shame and vulnerability, Bailey (2011) states how invulnerability "allows us to ignore those common traits of our humanity that either fail to match the fanciful images we have of ourselves, or that make us feel uncomfortable and exposed" (p. 481). In her TED talk on the power of vulnerability, Brown (2010) asserts that people tend to "numb vulnerability". The danger in engaging in this act is that an individual will consequently numb all other emotions and feelings in the process, which could lead to disastrous results. In some situations, resistance takes the form of retreat when faced with the threat of risk (Giese & Thiel, 2014). This avoidance can be further complicated in the context of leadership where the ability to be vulnerable can be useful for establishing trust in professional relationships. A study by Meyer et al. (2016) analyzed conversations of educational leaders with their staff to explore how they exhibited vulnerability through disclosure. Their findings revealed that leaders were inhibited toward disclosure because of their fear of the other's motives, their tendency to avoid addressing the real issues, and

their need to control the conversation. Rowland (2016) introduces the notion that a defense against vulnerability can manifest itself as a reliance on theorizing. In the field of psychotherapy, there is a tendency for therapists to use theory as a cushion against facing emotional challenges encountered in their work. "When our personal vulnerabilities are triggered, we might resort to a totalizing narrative to protect us from our feelings of powerlessness and helplessness" (Rowland, 2016, p. 280). This defense mechanism is mirrored in Shim's work (2017) with teachers and their self-reflection around racism. While experiencing vulnerability as they are engaged in this critical reflective process, teachers' defenses are enacted as they equate this sense of vulnerability with a loss of security. The reasons for resistance and the forms thereof indicate that internal factors such as strong negative emotions can sustain this resistance to vulnerability to the point of impeding productive and generative connection with others.

Emotional Vulnerability

In spite of the myriad ways that individuals attempt to resist vulnerability, there is hope within the literature that such challenges can be overcome in order to develop a strong foundation for exploring and embracing emotional vulnerability. The presence of trust is indicated in multiple sources as being conducive to the ability to embrace emotional vulnerability (Giese & Thiel, 2014; Hill, 2017; Ito & Bligh, 2017; McKinnon &Greenberg, 2017; Meyer et al., 2016; Rozmarin, 2017). In their work on leadership and disclosure of vulnerability, Ito and Bligh (2017) suggested that a "symbiotic, trust-building relationship" (p. 67) is necessary for followers to respond positively when those who lead them attempt to disclose. Along with this contingency is the perception of the

followers regarding the motivations underlying the leaders' choice to share their vulnerability. Meyer et al. (2016) whose similar work in the context of leadership addressed the concept of trust propensity which relies on perceived trustworthiness. Trust propensity is "the dispositional willingness to rely on and ultimately trust others" (p. 221-222). Being able to demonstrate humility (Bailey, 2011; D'Agnese, 2017; Gunaratnam, 2011; Ito & Bligh, 2017), show courage (Brown, 2010; Brown, 2012; Haugland et al., 2017; Ito & Bligh, 2017) and adopt an openness toward others (D'Agnese, 2017; Haugland et al., 2017; Ito & Bligh, 2017; McKinnon &Greenberg, 2017; Meyer et al., 2016; Petherbridge, 2016; Rozmarin, 2017; Tsai, 2016) are additional ways to embrace emotional vulnerability that will produce benefits to the self as well as generate meaningful connection with others.

A principle obstacle to vulnerability addressed prevalently in the literature is risk. (Brown, 2010; D'Agnese, 2017; Giese & Thiel, 2014; Hill, 2017; Ito & Bligh, 2017; Kelchtermans, 2015; Laufer & Santos, 2017; Meyer et al., 2016; Shim, 2017; Tsai, 2016). However, the same research does show that the ability to accept risks as a natural part of life and living with others can lead to greater acceptance and management of emotional vulnerability. Brown (2012) includes it in her definition of vulnerability. "I define vulnerability as uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure" (p. 34). Emotional vulnerability is championed in various manners in the scholarship reviewed (Bagnoli, 2016; Brown, 2012; Gunaratnam, 2011; McKinnon & Greenberg, 2017; Tsai, 2016). Bagnoli (2016) claimed that emotional vulnerability is necessary for practical thinking. Tsai (2016) describes emotional vulnerability through a discussion on interpersonal vulnerability in the context of intimate relationships. To avoid exploitation in such

relationships, individuals can work toward developing egalitarian relationships which decrease the potential for anyone to take advantage of another's emotional vulnerability. Humans must learn how to embrace the challenging emotional components that accompany being vulnerable. Efforts toward establishing a healthy emotional vulnerability can help us maximize our potential for the enriching connections that we naturally seek while being embedded in this world together with others, racially and ethnically diverse others included.

Vulnerability Before Others

The second principle theme which emerged from the current scholarship on vulnerability pertains to the idea of otherness, or external factors, and how they impact one's vulnerability, or perceived vulnerability. Such external factors create vulnerable populations at the macro level as well as vulnerable individuals at the micro level. Despite an exposure to potential exploitation from others, it remains necessary to accept this human condition of being embedded with others. Part of being human is engaging in enriching relationships with those around us and sharing in the connectedness that is what we naturally seek. In order for these interactions and relationships to be productive and generative as opposed to being characterized by fear and distrust, mutual vulnerability is as equally important as an offspring of emotional vulnerability. I will discuss this in the following sections and show its significance to the research topic.

Vulnerability and Otherness

The concept of vulnerable populations was prevalent during the literature search and survey stage across multiple contexts that did not all pertain to the goals of this particular research endeavor. Nonetheless, a few sources emerged that were worth

examining (Haugland et al., 2017; Holland, 2018; Laufer & Santos, 2017; Logar, 2010; Petherbridge, 2016; Rogers & Lange, 2013; Uysal, 2015). In the context of nursing education, vulnerable populations refer to patients who require care from their providers without judgement. The perceived vulnerability exists on both sides with patients feeling vulnerable by nature of their illness and nurses feeling vulnerable out of a fear for how to deliver the care needed to strangers, in particular those who come from different cultural backgrounds. An extreme case is found in the paper written by Holland (2018) who situates people of color as the ultimate vulnerable population in her critical assessment of how vulnerability is chosen for them in a way that "almost seems like natural selection" (p. 206). In their paper investigating the link between vulnerability and identity in the context of language, Laufer and Santos (2017) break down the designations ascribed to different vulnerable populations and associate these with resultant different degrees of vulnerability. Rozmarin (2017) situates vulnerability within a political dimension as well as a human dimension based on an "asymmetric power relation" between nations undertaking efforts at peacemaking. At the macro level, vulnerable populations seem to lose any sense of agency when they are labeled as such.

On a smaller scale, we can see how Ito and Bligh (2017) introduced contingencies of successfully sharing vulnerability by disclosing to others in the context of leadership. In addition to the need for a symbiotic trust-building relationship aforementioned, they proposed that followers also rely on the context and the leader's motivations for sharing to determine their response to such vulnerable disclosure. Bagnoli (2016) also addresses vulnerabilities and contingencies in her article examining the relationship between the two topics as they relate to immunity and regret. For her, practical thought protects us

from threats to our integrity and she foregrounds emotional vulnerability as the source of such critical practical thinking. At this micro level, we see this vulnerability to others similarly manifested, and how it positions us as subjected humans.

Regardless of whether individuals perceive themselves to be vulnerable to others at the macro or micro level, there is potential for exploitation (Laufer & Santos, 2017; Logar, 2010; Petherbridge, 2016; Rogers & Lange, 2013; Tsai, 2016). This threat of exploitation is even greater when there is unequal distribution of power and perceived inequity. This construct is most present in situations such as the employer-employee relationship that Giese and Thiel (2014) presented in their study of equity expectations within a cross-cultural context. Likewise, this inequity shows itself in the leader-follower relationship. Tensions that result from such unequal power distribution can jeopardize the ability to establish trust, especially when emotions are part of the equation (Meyer et al., 2016). The existence of unequal power is also salient in the context of intimate relationships whether with a partner, friend, or family member where emotions play a larger role and emotional vulnerability is hence a central defining element. As Bagnoli (2016) stated, these attachments have the dual power of bringing us joy or compromising our joy. Tsai (2016) posits three ways in which intimate relationships can be exposed to exploitation: use of the target to achieve one's purpose, through exercise of control, and by taking advantage of the target's vulnerability. He names this phenomena interpersonal vulnerability. Power is a central idea in the paper by Petherbridge (2016) where she examines its connection with interdependence and recognition in the context of vulnerability. She placed emphasis on the "unequal distribution of vulnerability, that is, the ways in which vulnerability is unequally distributed across gender, race, ethnic, and

regional lines" (p. 591). This point is similar to the degrees of vulnerability as expressed by Laufer and Santos (2017) based on one's designation within the vulnerable population subset. Bhattacharya (2016) examined social inequities as they are manifested in higher education and uses narratives to illustrate how discourses in this context contain micro-aggressions that reinforce a colonizing structure. Through her own personal narratives, she showed how vulnerability can serve as a "fertile site of intersectionality and inquiry" (p. 311) to combat stubborn hegemonic structures. These external factors to which humans are exposed must be addressed and acknowledged to minimize the chance for exploitation while maximizing opportunity to be productively vulnerable with others.

Acceptance of Others

Returning to Bailey's (2011) work on White shame and vulnerability, we are reminded of the following: "Vulnerability is always openness before someone" (p. 480). The existence of 'someone' to whom we are vulnerable supports the idea that we seek recognition from others for our vulnerability. In similar fashion, Shim (2017) employed Lacanian thought to emphasize that "the sense of human beings always refers to their sense of others, and the human desire for wholeness is also always in a sense a desire for others" (p. 833). Perhaps Rozmarin (2017) explicated it best in the following statement: "Vulnerability is a dual phenomenon: while parts of it may point to concrete wrongs that must be addressed and changed, other aspects point to the human condition of mutual dependence and a quest for comfort and well-being" (p. 554). If this is the case for our condition as humans in this world, then we must find a way to live in harmony by embracing our vulnerabilities in ways that lead to enriching, productive, and generative relationships with others.

The research presented in this literature review unveiled vulnerability, its potential and its challenges, in a myriad of various relationship contexts: cross-racial relationships (Bailey, 2011; Bhattacharya, 2016; Gunaratnam, 2011; Hill, 2017; Holland, 2018), employer-employee relationships (Gibson et al., 2018; Giese & Thiel, 2014), teacher-student relationships (Hill, 2017; Kelchtermans, 2015; Shim, 2017; Uitto et al., 2016), personal or intimate relationships (McKinnon & Greenberg, 2017; Tsai, 2016), leader-follower relationships (Hinton, 2016; Ito & Bligh, 2017; Meyer et al., 2016), practitioner-patient relationships (Haugland et al., 2017; Rowland, 2016), and nation-nation relationships (Rozmarin, 2017). In addition to these scholarly contributions, there were authors who championed for specific types of relationships in the name of vulnerability. Wu (2013) who advocated for a curriculum of vulnerability in our interactions with others claims that "vulnerability binds us in moral obligations with each other" (p. 50). For her, vulnerability is a matter of ethics. Both Tsai (2016) and Ito and Bligh (2017) called for egalitarian relationships as a way to resolve unequal power distribution and minimize potential for exploitation. In their study on self-disclosure, Gibson et al. (2018) provided findings that required us to reconsider whether such acts of vulnerability always led to positive outcomes. Their research informs us there is a marked difference in how vulnerability is received within work relationships as opposed to purely social relationships. Although this seems to counter the literature emphasizing that leaders' sharing of vulnerability has the power to improve relations with their followers (Hinton, 2016; Ito & Bligh, 2017; Meyer et al., 2016), there exists an underlying notion of motivation, similar to the study by Ito and Bligh (2017), on the part of the individual sharing that may warrant further study in this professional context.

Regardless of the nature of relationships in which humans are engaged and embedded, the literature points to a shared responsibility and interconnectedness among humans that cannot be avoided nor denied.

Mutual Vulnerability

In the article by Petherbridge (2016), vulnerability is positioned as a potential "critical or ethical category" (p. 589) which would necessitate intersubjectivity and interdependence as a norm in our society. Vulnerability is also proposed as "a means of challenging the modern liberal notion of the individualistic and sovereign subject, replacing it with one based on interdependence and responsibility" (p. 591). The notion of a shared responsibility or shared humanity is echoed in other settings found within the literature such as in the arena of higher education, in the context of leadership, in the field of psychotherapy, between nations, and in the classroom (Bhattacharya, 2016; Ito & Bligh, 2017; Rowland, 2016; Rozmarin, 2017; Uitto et al., 2016). In his study on flourishing, Uysal (2015) provided data to show that experiencing high levels of optimism, well-being and relatedness to others was linked positively with social competence and negatively with one's psychological vulnerability. This need to connect with others is advocated for by authors who see the potential for a shared vulnerability (Brown, 2010; Brown, 2012; Finn, 2015; John, 2016; McKinnon & Greenberg, 2017).

It seems that the prevailing thought throughout the literature is that vulnerability is a potential rather than a liability. Due to humans being constituted in this world, embedded with others, we cannot deny that this human condition of vulnerability is shared. However, there are those who move beyond the idea of shared vulnerability and advocate for mutual vulnerability, which implies a sense of reciprocity. If we consider

the obstacles to individuals accepting their emotional vulnerability and the efforts they take to resist said vulnerability, this idea of mutuality and reciprocity might provide some assurances. If we are fearful of being exposed to others, then knowing that others feel equally vulnerable to be seen, might give us more confidence. If we are uncomfortable with not knowing the outcomes of our choices or action, realizing that others feel equally uncertain, might give us some comfort. If we feel shame in awareness of our fallibility, then knowing that others feel equally afraid of making mistakes, might help us feel stronger. Mutual vulnerability is what many authors have proposed as a way to help humans renew and restore their relationships with others (Bagnoli, 2016; Brown, 2012; Giese & Thiel, 2014; Guishard, 2009; Gunaratnam, 2011; Haugland et al., 2017; Ito & Bligh, 2017; Petherbridge, 2016; McKinnon & Greenberg, 2017; Rowland, 2016; Rozmarin, 2017). "The result of this mutually respectful vulnerability is increased connection, trust and engagement" (Brown, 2012, p. 46). Perhaps it is John (2016) who foregrounds personal and caring relationships in the context of adult education by hearkening Freire's pedagogy of love as a framework which weds emotion and cognition, captured it best. "There is evidence that emotions build trust and solidarity which foster sharing, dialogue and action and declare our fundamental interconnectedness as humans" (p. 348). Vulnerability, which we have seen is relational by nature, must also therefore be mutual in order to thrive.

Human Interconnectedness

To echo the concepts of intersubjectivity and interdependence put forth by Petherbridge (2016), we now turn to a look at human interconnectedness and its portrayal in the literature. The definition inspired by Rozmarin (2017) in the introduction chapter

describes human interconnectedness as being mutually dependent on one another for comfort and well-being. Of the themes that surfaced in the literature review, comfort and well-being were referenced in multiple sources. Prior to discussing those concepts however, I will begin by addressing broader conceptions of interconnectedness at a macro level, then transitioning to connectedness at the micro relationship level, leading to the significance of the emotional component, and ultimately to human interconnectedness as a source of personal comfort and well-being.

Universal or Global Interconnectedness

At the macro level of society, and more broadly in a universal sense, the concept of human interconnectedness is described in the literature through multiple perspectives (Hill, 2006; Linklater, 2009; Montero & Colman, 2010; Watson, 2010). Hill (2006) furnishes a viewpoint of interconnectedness that hinges on social belonging as a dimension crucial to human existence. She situates such a perspective within an indigenous framework to help readers understand the concept through a cultural worldview lens. "This worldview emphasizes connectedness to the creation/universe, sense of self, and recognizes the interdependence and interrelatedness of everything within the creation/universe" (p. 210). This notion of a universal connectedness is supported in the field of nursing specifically under the theory of human caring (Watson, 2010). Nursing practitioners who wish to adhere to this theory and apply its elements to their practice need to adopt a worldview that advocates for a oneness characterized by "unbroken wholeness and connectedness of all" (p. 323). Although we do not see social belonging explicitly named in the nursing context as in the article by Hill (2006), there are a couple of connections to be made between the two belief systems. First, the

psychological need for social belonging is related to an individual's need to be accepted by others. Both feelings of belonging and acceptance influence sense of self and identity, which is undergirded in the American Indian worldview. Using transpersonal caring as the model for delivery of services to patients, Watson (2010) emphasizes that the individual being treated is "viewed as whole and complete, regardless of illness or disease" (p. 327). This is the greatest form of acceptance that can be shown to a human being and underscores the connectedness between all humans. Second, because a sense of belonging is a basic need, counter feelings of isolation and disconnection can have adverse effects on the health and emotional well-being on an individual. This has obvious implications for the nursing field, specifically professionals working with mental health patients. Both sources demonstrate a similar unifying and constructive viewpoint that posits all humans as interconnected and is best described by Lowe and Struthers (2001) as "building, healing, taking risks, creating together, cohesiveness, unfolding, interrelating with all weaving, and transforming" (as cited by Hill, 2006, p. 212).

Other sources in the literature situate human interconnectedness on a global level, linking it to concepts of collective consciousness and transnational solidarity (Linklater, 2009; Linklater, 2010; Montero & Colman, 2000). Montero and Colman's (2000) article discussing collective consciousness is not different from previous perspectives reviewed in that they also advance a new perspective of human interconnectedness. The distinction resides in their emphasis on the needed transition from individualism toward a more interconnected capacity for relating to each other that could transform our social world. "The psychology of human interconnectedness illuminates collectivity, connection, and reflected consciousness in ways that include and transcend our individual natures" (p.

211). They insist on the importance of embracing our embeddedness in the world with others, especially in the context of intergroup relations. This conception parallels the work of Petherbridge (2016) and D'Agnese (2017) reviewed in the section under vulnerability who both posit that we have the capacity to approach this embeddedness in more productive ways in the spirit of transformation. Another distinction from previous views on human interconnectedness is the promotion of "the third thing" (Montero & Colman, 2000, p. 218). From this viewpoint, we are all interrelated under an integrated framework that does not acknowledge the self/other dichotomy but rather joins individual and collective capacities into a new entity of a third kind. The urgency in the literature for increased understanding of our worldwide human connection is supported by the work of Linklater (2009, 2010). However, his view of human interconnectedness is contextualized within an ethical framework of transnational solidarity. Shedding light on the increased interconnectedness of humans across the globe as a result of living in a growing globalized world, he stresses the importance of "solidarity with strangers" (Linklater, 2010, p. 155). In order to do this, humans must resign themselves to a new process that promotes a more civilized world in which we are empathically attuned to one another. With the acknowledgement that this constitutes a new phase of human experience and interconnectedness which is novel to most people, he challenges us to find ways to emotionally identify with others for the future of humanity. Although his work is grounded in macro concerns regarding international relations, it is noteworthy that he attributes our ability to face this challenge by implementing micro level practices such as that of "transformations of the emotional ties that simultaneously bind human beings together" (Linklater, 2009, p. 487). This standpoint provides us with the

opportunity to turn our discussion now to the micro level of interdependence and relatedness between humans which surfaced in the literature as a secondary theme.

Human Interdependence and Relatedness

If previous authors set the stage for reminding us how we are inevitably universally and globally connected to one another, then other scholarly sources extend this to a more intimate level in terms of human interdependence and relatedness (Dinkins, 2017; Linklater, 2009, 2010; Lu, Dane & Gellman, 2005; Ventres, Dharamsi & Ferrer, 2017). Transitioning from international relations to interpersonal relations, Barrett-Lennard (2007) examines the nature of human relationships, offering two opposing viewpoints before advancing one as the preferred approach for positioning "human relationship as a central mode of connection" (p. 185). The first describes a relationship between two people as a transaction and identifies with the more individualistic view justifying the traditional reasons for which people participate, such as to exchange ideas or feelings. The second viewpoint describes relationships as encompassing the whole person, acting as a life system for the individuals involved and whom are inextricably connected to each other. Rather than seen as individuals whose paths simply intersect via a transactional relationship, this position emphasizes a communal stance representative of a holistic system inclusive of all types of human associations whereby participants negotiate and form their identity. In other words, if relationships are more than just an exchange between two people, but a living phenomenon that connects all people, individuals who do not experience relationships do not have a chance to discover who they are. "The becoming of persons, in this view, centers on inherent connective and relational processes in human living" (p. 190). Human interconnectedness then is not

only an inevitable condition of life, but it is something that we must seek out in order to fully evolve as humans. This holistic way of viewing relationships reinforces previous claims that we do not just need belonging, but we need others in order to support our mental, emotional, physical and spiritual growth and well-being.

Rettie (2003) offers a comprehensive look at how to understand the relationship between connectedness, social presence and awareness. Awareness is perceived as being aware of an external other. Connectedness is echoed in the same sense along with other authors previously discussed who view it as a fundamental need of humans. Social presence, not heretofore discussed, can be understood as interactions between individuals involving their "perceptions, behavior or attitudes" (p. 1). Figure 1 illustrates the relationship between all three elements.

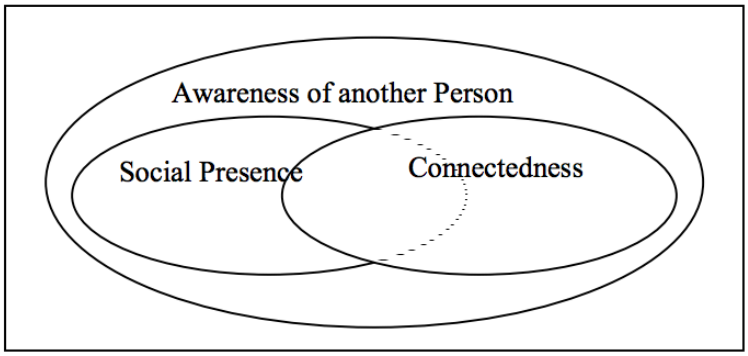


Figure 1: The Relationships between Social Presence, Awareness and Connectedness (Rettie, 2003)

Although social presence requires awareness of the other, mere awareness does not automatically imply the existence of social presence. The same can be said of connection, which as related to our focus on human interconnectedness, warrants the need for practices that elevate our social awareness to the point where individuals can

experience its benefits of belonging and intimacy, themes reiterated in the literature as integral to well-being.

It was no surprise that a search for human interconnectedness resulted in a number sources addressing the concept in in the context of health and wellness (Hill, 2006; Latimer, 2013; Lu, Dane & Gellman, 2005; Smith & Liehr, 2008; Ventres, Dharamsi & Ferrer, 2017; Watson, 2010). The work of Ventres, Dharamsi and Ferrer (2017) advocates for the application of social interdependency to foster an appreciation for human connectedness within the field of clinical practice. In this context, an individual's well-being is connected to that of the other "by envisioning and desiring for others what we might desire for ourselves" (p. 84). Social interdependency champions shared meaning and shared responsibility through collective capacity. This echoes the position introduced by Montero & Colman (2000) around collective consciousness, thus providing a concrete way of applying their theory into everyday practice for health professionals in particular. Dinkins (2017) explores this dynamic of reciprocal care related to the health context but more specifically in another important arena, that regarding our older generation of adults. Because older adults tend to experience a degree of marginalization in society, the chance for them to suffer from isolation and disconnection is greater than for younger generations. As such, the need for human interconnectedness is even more pronounced for this adult group. To place emphasis on this specific contextual need, Dinkins (2017) refers to the work of Arendt (1937) and that of Levinas (1969) to describe Otherness in a constructive light. "Rather than seeing this inescapable otherness as a negative, Arendt saw it as an essential and defining feature of human connection" (p. 15). The other is essential to our sense and development of the

self. This is akin to the holistic view of relationships as posited by Barrett-Lennard (2007). We can only understand ourselves by relating with and understanding others. Levinas (1969) elevates this mode of thinking by claiming that "we find our own self reflected in the face of the Other" (as cited by Dinkins, 2017, p. 15). Adhering to this notion of our identity being reflected in the gaze of an external other has the potential to influence our choices and behaviors toward a more ethical stance. Adopting such a practice with all others, not just older adults, is an example of how to adapt the macro level concept of transnational solidarity in its ethical sense (Linklater, 2009) to the micro level of human associations and social relationships. This is an affirming way to secure that indispensable need for belonging and intimacy of all humans, whether admitted or not. If "connectedness is at the absolute heart of what it means to be human" (p. 16), then attention now must be given to the affective dimension of human interconnectedness.

Affective Experience of Interconnectedness

Although not surprising that the query conducted on human interconnectedness yielded a minimal number of sources, with the majority written for health and wellness professionals, it is nonetheless revealing. There is certainly a lacuna in the existing body of literature outside of the health industry that addresses human interconnectedness in its natural everyday context between individuals or groups. Perhaps this is why Linklater (2009) has challenged us to adopt a new global civilizing process that is rooted in emotionally identifying with one another, inclusive of people we have never met or do not know. Particularly in the context of cross-racial relationships, which will be discussed later, very few studies exist that examine the affective dimension of bridging

the racial or ethnic divide. However, since there are scholars who do see the potential of foregrounding the affective dimension of human interconnectedness, we might consider following in their footsteps so that an ethic of care is not confined to the professional arena but that it is expanded and permeates all domains of human existence (Hill, 2006; Linklater, 2009; Lu, Dane & Gellman, 2005). Rettie (2003) states that "connectedness is an emotional experience" (p. 3) with affective benefits. Hill (2006) further claims that "not being connected has consequences for cognition, affect, and behavior" (p. 213). There is a reciprocal action at play where emotions such as a strong sense of belonging increases our feeling of interconnectedness, while feeling connected to others increases our sense of self and well-being.

One article written by Lu, Dane and Gellman (2005) highlighted the results from a pilot project where participants learned skills involved in enacting empathic attunement through a culturally sensitive lens. Through this experiential model which taught mindfulness activities, participants were able to experience "a different kind of human connectedness with the other" (p. 89). Not surprisingly, the project was conducted with the goal of assisting social workers with the skills needed to interact with their patients in ways that fostered empathic attunement. This was achieved through the teaching of three components: emptying, contemplation and being present. Emptying involves a release of former attachments in a stage of unknowing that potentiates new perceptions of interrelatedness which transcend traditional borders. Contemplation does not reinforce the individual self, but requires deep awareness of one's self as connected and bound to others. Lastly, being present centers on intuitive consciousness in the moment that requires an individual to act authentically with others. The question arises once more

whether as a growingly interconnected society we can learn to employ similar emotive skills in our relationships with others to enhance those affective connections thus replacing our individualistic tendencies with a collective worldview that perpetuates "mutual heartfelt connection and identification" (Lu, Dane & Gellman, 2005, p. 92). If we accept the challenge by Linklater (2009), then efforts at reciprocity are needed in order create the mutual effect that is integral to any human interconnection that promotes the well-being of all involved parties.

Interconnectedness as Comfort and Well-Being

The definition inspired by Rozmarin (2017) in the introduction chapter describes human interconnectedness as being mutually dependent on one another for comfort and well-being. This message is similarly conveyed in the literature that the other is essential (Agamanolis, 2008; Barrett-Lennard, 2007; Hill, 2006; Latimer, 2013; Lu, Dane & Gellman, 2005; Smith & Liehr, 2008; Ventres, Dharamsi & Ferrer, 2017). These concepts of comfort and well-being as part and parcel to human interconnectedness have surfaced throughout this literature review. They are not to be considered separate from our previous discussion around belonging and acceptance, from new perspectives calling for collective capacity and consciousness raising, or from our own self being reflected in the other. They are woven together because to feel like we belong and are accepted gives us a sense of comfort and security (Hill, 2006). To care for others is to care for ourselves, which contributes to the well-being of all humans (Ventres, Dharamsi, & Ferrer, 2017; Watson, 2010). Just as humans are mutually reliant on each other, these elements are all interdependently woven into the fabric of human interconnectedness. With the reminder that a "deficit of social interconnectedness endangers the health of

individuals and communities" (Agamanolis, 2008, p. 122), it is critical to look to those areas where human or social interconnectedness is needed most. We must turn our attention to cross-racial relationships as they currently exist in contemporary society and see for ourselves if the lacuna of human interconnectedness in the literature is paralleled by a similar gap of human interconnectedness in our relations with those who are racially or ethnically different from us.

Cross-Racial Relationships

The literature reveals multiple ways of classifying types of contact between individuals of different races and ethnicities. Perhaps the most well-known is intergroup contact defined by Allport (1954) as "interactions with people who are different from oneself in terms of race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or other social categories" (Bowman & Park, 2014, p. 661). The postsecondary arena provides categories of intergroup contact that are specific to types that cut across racial or ethnic lines. Aside from cross-racial interactions, which can be further categorized into positive or negative ones, the world of higher education introduces interracial friendship as a viable classification of intergroup contact (Bowman & Park, 2014). For the purposes of this study, I am more interested in cross-racial relationships, which seem to fall somewhere in between what we would consider simple interactions and what we deem as close friendships. However, in order to shed full light on what it means to be in contact with someone from another race or ethnicity so that the current study is well informed, my intent was to highlight the research that covers the spectrum of what can be generally considered as cross-racial relationships. To do so, the discussion which follows will

address the predictors, benefits, nature and quality, as well as considerations of cross-racial relationships as found in the literature.

Possibilities for Cross-Racial Relationships

The potential for cross-racial relationships to emerge that are beneficial in nature has been theorized by social psychology scholars dating back prior to the era of civil rights. The work of Allport (1954) which resulted in the Intergroup Contact Hypothesis posits specific conditions needed in order for such relationships to thrive. Both groups on either side of the racial divide must work in cooperation, must be bound by a common goal, must experience equal status, and must be supported by external backing such as a form of authority or law (Odell, Korgen & Wang, 2005; Perry, 2013). Later into the 20th century, Pettigrew (1998) introduced friendship as a requisite condition for enhancing interracial contact that would create positive attitudes toward racial groups (Jacobson & Johnson, 2006; Odell et al., 2005). Both theories of intergroup contact are optimistic in their belief that sustained contact under the right conditions could lead to reduced prejudice and increased trust between racial and ethnic groups. These viewpoints can be starkly contrasted with constrict theory by Putnam (2007) which argues that the more exposure that individuals have to diverse others, less trust will prevail and threaten meaningful cross-racial relations (van der Linden, Hooghe, de Vroome, & Van Laar, 2017). The common denominator in these opposing theories is the matter of trust and it is feasible to see that the way trust is manifested in cross-racial relationships will determine their ultimate fate. In keeping with the idea of possibilities for cross-racial relationships along a positive vein, polyculturalism is a theory worth examining. Polyculturalism boasts a historical perspective in that it understands how different racial

and ethnic groups have interacted and influenced each other in the past, and that they are still very much interconnected in the present (Rosenthal & Levy, 2016). This approach fosters a willingness to come together and seek out those connections which could lead to positive intergroup relationships. Polyculturalism is dissimilar to multiculturalism in its focus on connections between diverse peoples rather than on intergroup differences. Both intergroup contact theory and a polycultural perspective give hope to society about the possibilities for historically, socially, and politically divided racial and ethnic groups to enter into positive cross-racial relationships.

Being aware of frameworks in the literature that support the development of cross-racial relationships serves as a foundation for understanding the more concrete predictors such as geographical location, physical settings or social structures. Perry (2013) advances four settings conducive to intergroup contact that may lead to more tolerant racial attitudes: schools, residential areas, the work site, and religious group sites. Although the context in this case is in support of locating settings where interracial marriage might be welcomed, these geographical contexts are applicable and hold potential for positive cross-racial relationships since those would naturally be a precursor to the more committed relationship between spouses. However, Perry (2013) does caution us about selection bias, the possibility that individuals who are already open-minded about interacting with diverse others would deliberately choose to spend time in these areas that are racially diverse. Although it seems that this phenomenon may not lead to increased acceptance of diverse others since it already exists, the increased intergroup contact could result in more cross-racial relationships that evolve into friendships. Among the four settings proposed, cross-racial interactions occurring in the

workplace are the least likely to result in decreased prejudice due to their "hierarchical, competitive, and superficial" nature (Perry, 2013, p. 15). However, a study conducted by Payne, McDonald and Hamm (2013) in the workplace uncovers the potential for cross-racial friendships when workers are a part of a team that is self-directed. Data were collected via face-to-face interviews with a representation of various residents across the United States who identify as participants on a workplace team. The researchers hoped to determine whether teams of diverse members promote positive racial integration, and findings show this to be true of worker-directed teams as opposed to those that are manager-led. The hierarchies prevalent in workplace settings remain intact in manager-led teams and reduce the opportunity for greater cooperation and interracial connections among the members. For cross-racial friendships to emerge in the workplace, teams of diverse members must be allowed to self-manage in an environment conducive to cooperation as well as organizational openness.

Schools or college campuses are seen as sites that would foster the greatest opportunity for cross-racial interactions. However, Gurin (1999) reminds us that it is does not suffice "to bring students of different racial/ethnic backgrounds to campus and expect the benefits associated with diversity to accrue" (as cited in Park & Bowman, 2015, p. 20). There are social conditions such as individual initiatives that help increase the chances for cross-racial relationships or friendships to develop (Rawlins, 2009). A theory attributed to Wimmer and Lewis (2010) accords us a framework to understand some of these factors that serve as predictors of interracial contact: availability, propinquity, homophily, and balancing/sociality. College campuses might ask themselves the following questions to address these factors, respectively. Is there greater

availability of students representing various racial and ethnic groups? Does the structural diversity lend itself to increased propinquity so such students can interact and connect with one another? Or does it foster segregation, which supports homiphily where students befriend others within their same race group? And lastly, how can friendship balancing and sociality be countered so as to not reinforce homophily by proliferating friendships of same race peers (Bowman & Park, 2014)? Social predictors are further elucidated in the literature among two sources in particular, one study and one article. Still in the context of college campuses, Park and Bowman (2015) discuss "bonding social capital" and "bridging social capital" in their study on religion as social capital. The former refers to relationships between same-group peers whereas the latter speaks to relationships between people of different backgrounds. Yi and Graziul (2017) discuss these same terms but in the context of religious congregations, yet another of the four settings aforementioned advanced by Perry (2013) as being conducive to acceptance of racially diverse others. Similarly, bonding social capital is stated to be characteristic of homogenous groups. Differently, they categorize the opposite phenomenon as racially bridging social capital. For the purposes of their analysis, they maintain that congregations who adopt a pan-racial perspective deliberately seek out diverse races as members. As such, these religious groups attempt to foster bridging social capital. "We conceptualize congregation racial diversity as a weak or potential form of bridging social capital that, depending on other factors, can be converted into close, interracial ties" (Yi & Graziul, 2017, p. 235). One factor in question is that of social embeddedness which refers to the amount of close connections that could lead to cross-racial friendships. The findings from Park and Bowman's study (2015) support the potential for diverse religious

congregations to promote cross-racial relationships. Working with minority college students, the researchers hypothesized that those students who participate in religious groups on campus would indicate a lower amount of cross-racial interactions due to the homogenous nature of such groups. The results of their study do not support this particular hypothesis, but rather indicate that religiosity leads to greater CRI (cross-racial interaction), which is more aligned with the work of Yi and Graziul (2017). In fact, Park and Bowman (2015) ultimately conclude that "religious diversity and religiosity appear to play a role in supporting bridging social capital and racial diversity in college" (p. 33) which can be attributed to communal values of religious groups. Further studies would be needed though to justify this claim. What the literature informs us regarding intergroup contact and the potential for development of cross-racial relationships is that regardless of the frameworks which posit certain predictors over others, it seems that various conditions, both structural and social, must be present to influence an individual's ability and willingness toward interacting, engaging, or even developing close ties with others of different races or ethnicities.

Benefits of Cross-Racial Relationships

Being intentional about how to create these conditions for the development of cross-racial relationships or friendships will benefit our society, at the macro and micro levels in relation to their ability to reduce social distance between people of different races or ethnicities (Odell, Korgen, & Wang, 2005; Okech & Champe, 2008; Perry, 2013). Three articles illumine the existence of social distance between dominant and minority groups in attempts to de-problematize it by examining the positive effects of cross-racial attitudes or interactions on its mitigation. College campuses surface again as

fertile places for studies around cross-racial friendships. Odell, Korgen and Wang (2005) conducted a study to explore the effect of variables such as diversity initiatives and cross-racial friendships on social distance between various majority-minority and minority-minority pairs. Data were collected through surveys completed by over 500 college students with the purpose of measuring social distance. Although results show a strong correlation between cross-racial friendships and social distance, they cannot be attributed to any diversity measures put in place by the participating university. "The fact that participation in cross-racial friendships was the only variable that had an impact on the level of social distance among the races provides clear evidence of the potential for extracurricular cross-racial contact" (p. 303). Despite the lack of correlation between interracial friendships and diversity initiatives on campus, the study provides us with hope by illustrating there is a strong argument that opportunities for intergroup contact can reduce social distance and produce greater harmony among the ever-growing diverse population of higher education students. Beyond college, the benefits of cross-racial friendships can also be understood in terms of their ability to reduce social distance.

In an article by Okech and Champe (2008), the authors acknowledge that social distance can be a barrier to the development of close relationships due to fears and anxieties on both sides of the racial divide. However, they offer evidence that reduced social distance which leads to reduced stereotypes and increased sensitivity can occur through efforts by both groups by way of "increased cross-racial contact, interaction and prolonged engagement" (p. 108). Even though such efforts at developing close cross-racial relationships will require empathy, commitment and willingness to understand one another, the benefits of a more just and equal society are worthwhile. It is important to

note that social distance varies between different racial groups, with the largest gap existing between Whites and Blacks (Odell et al., 2005; Perry, 2013). This can be attributed to the unabashed racism that has historically divided the two groups (Okech & Champe, 2008). Nonetheless, a study such as that conducted by Perry (2013) in which he examines whether racially diversified settings influence the attitudes of whites toward interracial marriage provides some optimism around interracial friendships and their significance in society. Data were collected through telephone and questionnaire responses to gauge the extent to which whites would be willing to marry Blacks, Latinos or Asians. A secondary goal of the study was to determine any effects resulting from interracial friendships. Findings reveal that whites' attitudes toward interracial marriage and the development of cross-racial friendships vary according to the type of setting. Additionally, the study findings uncover a link evidencing that whites' attitudes are more tolerant toward interracial marriage if they have themselves developed friendships with individuals from the racial group in question. It is possible to conclude that a potential benefit of cross-racial friendships is decreased prejudice and increased acceptance on the part of whites toward the minority groups reported in the study.

Jacobson and Johnson (2006) provide us with the viewpoint of African Americans toward interracial marriage by elucidating results from a national New York Times poll from the year 2000. With a sample of over 900 African American participants, results show that 85% of those who responded to the interview question about their opinion on interracial marriage approve. Although it appears that this set of data show African Americans to be more tolerant toward interracial marriage than whites as reported in Perry's (2013) study, it is not possible to make direct comparisons between the attitudes

of the majority and minority groups. The study examining white attitudes asked participants specifically about their feelings of interracial marriage with specific racial groups of Blacks, Latinos or Asians. The study examining African American attitudes asked their opinion of interracial marriage in general terms. What does connect the two studies is that both revealed a link between interracial friendship and interracial marriage, with the former mediating the latter. "The results suggest that the demographic and structural factors provide opportunities for interracial friendships to develop, which in turn increase the approval of interracial marriage" (Jacobson & Johnson, 2006, p. 580). Cross-racial relationships once again are evidenced as helping to reduce negative stereotypes and prejudice. As the social distance between members of different races and ethnicities lessens due to increased opportunities for positive contact, our society at large can begin to feel more integrated.

In considering how cross-racial relationships can benefit individuals at the micro level, we see cognitive, affective and physical advantages. Returning to the work of Bowman and Park (2015) centered on cross-racial interactions and friendships in the collegiate setting, and specifically to a longitudinal study they conducted to examine the effects of each type of experience on student outcomes, an interesting divergence emerges from the findings. In order to ascertain which types of intergroup contact are more productive for students, researchers conducted in-person interviews with close to 4,000 first year college students across 28 institutions and completed follow up surveys with about 3,000 of those students during their junior or senior year. The participants represented White, Black, Latino/a and Asian American students. Although the data reveal a strong correlation between cross-racial interactions and various student

outcomes, there was no strong link with cross-racial friendships. Furthermore, the outcomes of college satisfaction and self-reported growth were attributed to cross-racial interactions for all four racial and ethnic groups. A particular finding worth noting is that the dependent variable related to ease of getting along with racial peers was also correlated to cross-racial interactions, except in the case of White students. Bowman and Park (2015) explain this as a possible indication of whites' historical bias toward persons of color. With regards to the overall divergent finding, the authors claim that cross-racial interactions are more beneficial since they are a source of new information provided to students with each new diverse encounter. Contrary to this, close interracial friendships would not elicit new information but that which is redundant because members would be familiar with each other. This may be too simplistic a case to make since the study did not measure the quality of these relationships, whether casual intergroup interactions or close intergroup friendships. Without taking into consideration the nature and quality of such relationships, it would be difficult to determine whether one type surpasses the other in terms of positive student outcomes. However, the strength of this study is the evidence that cross-racial interactions at a minimum are beneficial in particular to the minority students, which is advantageous in the cognitive and social support they provide for groups historically marginalized. Other sources in the literature underscore additional benefits to the individual such as a sense of belonging, reduced isolation, a source of social support and reduced health symptoms, perspective-taking and empathy, and development of allophilia, respectively (Glass, Glass & Lynch, 2016; Plummer, Stone, Powell, & Allison, 2016; Page-Gould, Mendoza-Denton, & Mendes, 2014; Park, 2012; Rosenthal & Levy, 2016).

The Nature and Quality of Cross-Racial Relationships

Inhibiting factors. Knowing the predictors of cross-racial relationships can help us to create the favorable conditions for positive intergroup contact to occur. Understanding the benefits of cross-racial relationships can give us hope for what the future might hold if we increase those opportunities for sustained engagement between individuals or groups of different races or ethnicities which would reduce the social distance that prevents such necessary contact. For the purpose of this study, it is important to also consider the nature and quality of cross-racial relationships by gaining an understanding of associated factors or characteristics that either inhibit their development or that promote their development to a level of meaningfulness for all racial groups.

At the macro level, one significant barrier to the development of cross-racial relationships is the belief that race is a biological concept rather than a social construct (Williams & Eberhardt, 2008). Ascribing to this "biological essentialism" (p. 1033) is related to increased prejudice and stereotypes in that it reinforces the dichotomous in-group and out-group sentiment. Individuals who consider others of different races as being biologically different from them are not motivated to make connections because they view them as dispositional in character and behavior. There may be no motivation to reduce social distance with those who are inherently unalike. "Racial prejudice has become the dominant variable used to explain both reactions to existing racial disparities and the quality of interracial interactions" (p. 1034). More alarming than the lack of inclination to bridge the racial divide is that such individuals also lack concern when it comes to these disparities. Reactive empathy as discussed by Stephan and Finley (1999)

is described as an inappropriate response when exposed to others' suffering. This phenomenon exacerbates the marginalization of racially or ethnically different others to the extent that they are viewed as undeserving of concern, which is highly detrimental to cross-racial friendships at best, and cross-racial interactions at worst. If we reconsider Linklater's (2009) challenge for us to begin emotionally identifying with all others, empathy that is reactive rather than attuned can be destructive to human interconnectedness.

George and Yancey (2009) provide compelling research based on a study conducted with 100 participants representing White, Black, Hispanic and Asian populations in the United States. The interviews reveal racial attitudes toward unity and division by asking direct questions about what they feel unites or divides Americans. An interesting and tragic finding is that a significant percentage of Blacks and Whites both reported that they felt nothing united Americans. This pessimistic viewpoint echoes the aforementioned findings that social distance is greatest between Blacks and Whites (Odell et al., 2005; Perry, 2013). With regards to participant opinions about what divides Americans, race is the overwhelming variable across all four sub-groups. As such, we now turn the discussion to race and how this social construct is not only divisive, but leads to many other obstacles to the development of meaningful cross-racial relationships.

Historical racism has permeated our society and continues to manifest itself today in misunderstandings and acts of violence between the dominant White group and minority groups. This is not to say that violent incidents do not occur among and between these minority groups, but there is extensive literature documenting the

privileges accorded to White individuals while others from different races or ethnicities continue to live on the fringe of what is considered mainstream society (Alimo, 2012; Boutte & Jackson, 2014; Case, 2012; Lee, 2016; Reason, Scales & Millar, 2005; Yeung, Spanierman, & Landrum-Brown, 2013). "This history of racism and privilege as perpetuated by the white dominant race has resulted in a state of racial mistrust that adversely impacts cross-racial contacts, interactions and friendships in varied dimensions globally" (Okech & Champe, 2008, p. 106). In one article that examines the quality of friendships between Black and White females, the authors cite bell Hooks (1994) and her position that cross-racial friendships can help Black women handle the mistrust and assist White women in grappling with racism (Granger, 2002). Unless we find a way to confront racism on both sides of the racial divide by asking individuals to confront and explore their biases, sentiments of power and privilege will continue to feed the mistrust thus maintaining the social distance and consequently the negative stereotypes toward diverse racial and ethnic groups.

Aversive racism is more difficult to address since it cloaks racism whereby Whites who are able to express empathy for suffering minority groups still view such groups as inferior (Okech & Champe, 2008). It is this sense of inferiority felt on the part of persons of color that bring to the forefront challenges which inhibit the potential for cross-racial relationships to be mutually supportive. Acceptance is desired by groups who have been historically and widely marginalized and discriminated against for reasons related to simply being non-White (Page-Gould et al., 2014; Rawlins, 2009). However, the literature reveals a fear of rejection and judgement as individuals enter into cross-racial relations. Race-based rejection sensitivity informs us that individuals who

have experienced racial discrimination may experience anxiety about being rejected, which results in extreme emotions that could have negative health symptoms (Page-Gould et al., 2014). Interestingly enough, the study conducted by these researchers on the stress associated with interracial contexts linked race-based rejection sensitivity to greater levels of stress for Blacks engaged in fewer cross-racial friendships. This was not the case for Blacks who reported having many cross-race friends. Although it would appear that fear of rejection could culminate in negative symptoms such as stress or anxiety, thus acting as a barrier to cross-racial relationships, findings illustrate that cross-racial friendships can actually serve as an antidote and thus buffer such symptoms. Williams and Johnson (2011) discovered similar benefits when examining intercultural relationships in the context of friendships between American students and international students on a Southern college campus. The authors introduce the theory of Anxiety/Uncertainty Management and link it to the phenomenon of intercultural communication apprehension. Of the 80 students in the sample and based on responses from multiple questionnaires, "participants reporting no international student friendships had scores reflecting higher levels of intercultural communication apprehension" (p. 45). Although the context framing this study is more culturally based than racially, we see a pattern in that friendships with those who are ethnically different from us are equally beneficial in their ability to reduce anxiety and apprehension between participating members.

In addition to feelings of anxiety that stem from fear of rejection, there are other dimensions that may prohibit meaningful development of cross-racial relationships. Park (2012) described a case study where Black university alumni and staff involved with a

campus multiethnic faith organization expressed the quality of their cross-racial interactions as they relate to both race and religion. The first challenge introduced was "the tension between intentionality and tokenization" (p. 580). This paradoxical dichotomy was problematic in the development of cross-racial friendships within the organization. While non-Black students were seemingly well-intentioned in their efforts to reach out to Black students as a gesture toward transcending racial borders, this seemed contrived because it was an expectation of the organization. The ensuing result was that Black students felt the interactions were forced rather than authentic, which supports the concept of tokenism, and leads to misunderstanding. The second challenge is that of isolation which can result in increased racial battle fatigue, giving a name to the stress that students of color suffer when they are the minority group enclosed within a majority group environment where incidents of marginalization are perpetuated. Despite these challenges associated with the formation of cross-racial friendships, and despite their common faith not mediating racial tensions, some participants did report an advantage of their new friendships to be perspective-taking and empathy. As such, the benefits of embracing the diversity within a particular community did reveal themselves to some extent during the study.

Promoting factors. Now that certain inhibitors to meaningful cross-racial relationships have been highlighted, it is time to consider the flipside and examine factors that encourage or nurture their development. Just as having negative racial experiences might result in anxiety or fear which inhibits participation in cross-racial relationships, those who have had positive racial encounters are more willing to seek out and engage in cross-racial friendships (Okech & Champe, 2008; Park, 2012). Open-mindedness is

another variable that influences a person's willingness to reach out and connect with those who are racially or ethnically different (Williams & Johnson, 2011). What gives hope is that being open-minded is not an inherent disposition, but rather "an attitude or stance which can be cultivated with appropriate education and experiences" (p. 46). Being open of mind brings to the surface the connection with vulnerability. In the professional context, the article by Okech and Champe (2008) discusses the importance of cross-racial relationships and how patterns of these specific interpersonal relations have implications for the work of counsellors. One significant variable of which these professionals should be aware is "an individual's willingness and ability to address conflict openly" (p. 111) influencing the maintenance of a cross-racial friendship. Being able to successfully maneuver conflicts, both low and high levels, depends on the individuals involved to be vulnerable with one another. It is important to note that a commitment to vulnerability will depend on the racial groups involved since there will be variability in their ability and expression across race and ethnicity.

Self-awareness is a critical component since individuals must be able to examine their own beliefs and values and existing biases when it comes to constructively engaging with those who are racially or ethnically different. However, it is not enough to be open-minded toward others, and to be vulnerable or self-aware when expressing oneself in order to persist in the face of conflict that is inevitable in cross-racial relationships. A key ingredient in transitioning from relationships to friendships is prolonged engagement (Okech & Champe, 2008). Perry (2013) extends this need for sustained commitment by referencing Pettigrew's (1997) contact theory and specifically his inclusion of friendship potential. "Members of different racial groups should be friends (not just acquaintances)

with more than one person of another race" (p. 15). This is underscored in the work we reviewed by Page-Gould et al. (2014) and that of Williams and Johnson (2011) which problematized race-based rejection sensitivity and intercultural communication apprehension, respectively, but subsequently illustrated that the amount of cross-racial friendships or international friendships, can significantly mediate and reduce these obstacles to meaningful relationships. In addition, interracial contact can generate more interpersonally harmonious friendships when there is intimacy over superficiality. This idea is reminiscent of the case study by Park (2012) which describes the feelings of Black university alumni and staff that their friendships with members within their faith organization from different races or ethnicities felt more like token friendships rather than authentic ones that helped reduce social distance. Rawlins (2009) provides two variables that must be present for friendships to flourish. First, social conditions that provide opportunities for diverse individuals to meet and interact need to be in place. Second, he posits the importance of "shared meanings" which refer to "the emotional significance assigned to the interactions and pursuits between friends" (p. 137). In the context of cross-racial relationships, these shared meanings or what Laing (1972) called "co-inherence" (as cited by Rawlins, 2009, p. 138) are complicated by racial and ethnic differences. McCullough (1998) states this problem in clear terms, "Historically, racial difference is the single demographic characteristic most scholars find prohibits or prevents friendships from forming" (as cited by Rawlins, 2009, p. 139). Thus, it is essential to find the antidote to this racial divide which can transcend these unnecessary and limiting borders that separate individuals at both macro and micro levels of society, preventing us from feeling integrated and connected to each other as full humans.

Acknowledging the presence of race as a potentially divisive factor is a precursory step to developing meaningful cross-racial friendships because it forces us to recognize that members from different races and ethnicities are positioned differently. There are a multitude of subjectivities that need to be understood on both sides of the divide so that the resulting intersubjectivity between diverse groups is cooperative and constructive. "In these pursuits co-constructing personal narratives are crucial resources and pleasures of friendship" (Rawlins, 2009, p. 155). Storytelling and counter-storytelling has been described in the literature as a powerful way to bridge social distance (Kasl & Yorks, 2015; Carter-Francique, Hart, & Cheeks, 2015). If the members of various racial and ethnic groups have the space to share their subjective stories with each other, greater understanding can result which sheds light on different positionalities thus generating the shared meaning that friendships need to flourish. Perhaps storytelling is the answer to unleashing our vulnerability in a non-threatening way that might open people's minds and hearts toward authentically engaging in sustained cross-racial friendships driven by their own individual initiative.

Considerations of Cross-Racial Relationships

Knowing the possibilities for cross-racial relationships provides us with a general understanding of the conditions amenable to intergroup contact, which are potential launching pads for relationships and friendships to develop. The reasons revealed in the literature for which our society would benefit from the formation and maintenance of cross-racial relationships underscore the importance of ensuring that those predictive conditions exist. Once these relationships begin to form, it becomes important to be aware of the mechanisms that might inhibit interracial contact from progressing into close

friendships as well as the variables that foster their growth and development, and sustenance, over time. There are some final considerations instructive in nature that informed the study in terms of engendering the cooperation and respect necessary for meaningful cross-racial relationships to thrive (Payne, McDonald, & Hamm 2013).

Identity surfaces as an element that must be considered by those seeking to enhance cross-racial relationships in their respective contexts (Park, 2012; Rawlins, 2009). Around the concept of identity, Park (2012) introduces two opposing processes, ethnic transcendence and ethnic reinforcement. Ethnic transcendence is rooted in the goal of recategorization whereby members of the out-group are assimilated into the in-group to form "a common group identity that is unrelated to race" (p. 574). To the contrary, ethnic reinforcement brings together members of different races or ethnicities in order to capitalize on the diversity rather than extinguish it under a unifying collective group identity. Rosenthal and Levy (2016) might equate this difference of processes to that which distinguishes multiculturalism from polyculturalism, respectively. Rather than researching whether one approach is more effective than the other, Park's (2012) study situated religion as the common group identity and revealed to us that Black students in the faith organization experienced their racial identities as being tokenized rather than perceived of as something of genuine value. In other words, what they experienced seemed to be more akin to efforts toward ethnic transcendence, but at the expense of ethnic reinforcement. Rawlins (2009) however clearly argues for an approach that supports ethnic reinforcement and consequently, individual ethnic identities.

> One gift of friendship is to be perceived by our friends in ways that confirm our sense of self. A friend must be seen as a singular person—neither reduced to a

> token of race nor expanded into a nondescript representative of the human condition…for authentic friendship we all must retain our self-recognizing identities. (p. 152)

Using the work of Villard and Whipple (1976), Rawlins (2009) outlines four variants of identity that serve a role in maintaining meaningful cross-racial friendships: saliency, stability, valence and utility. Efforts by both parties on either side of the racial divide can help to edify individuation by understanding how salient and stable one's identity is or needs to be for them as they attempt to relate to one another. Additionally, cross-racial friendship partners will want to reflect on any positive or negative aspects of their identity as it is mediated in the relationship, as well as reflect on whether one's identity is aligned with what they hope to accomplish in the relationship as it progresses over multiple situations and contexts. Giving proper attention to these considerations associated with identity can mitigate any feelings of anxiety or fear of rejection that we previously discussed which can be barriers to transcending racial and ethnic borders.

Scholars in the literature emphasize the importance of directly acknowledging and addressing racism as a precursory step to forming meaningful interracial relationships (Okech & Champe, 2008; Rawlins, 2009; Thomas, 1993). Thomas' (1993) important study explored patterns of racial engagement in cross-race developmental relationships in the work context. Using a qualitative field study approach, he examined data that described hierarchical work relationships between African-American and White workers, focusing on the strategies they employed for dealing with race. His findings illustrated that "their racial perspectives predispose them to prefer either the direct-engagement or denial and suppression strategy for handling racial difference" (p. 176). Additionally,

pairs who shared the same perspective were inclined to use the same strategy, which positioned these Black-White developmental relationships with mentor-protégé like qualities where interpersonal bonds could form. A converse finding was revealed in that pairs who did not share a common racial perspective perceived race to be an inhibiting factor, suppressing any opportunity for attachment or support. To relate the findings to the need to openly confront race, the preferred strategy of the African-Americans who participated, representative of both roles in the hierarchical pairs, depended on their racial perspective, racial awareness, and integration of their racial identity with their professional identity. The African-American workers who measured high across all three factors showed a preference for direct engagement. Within these relationships of direct engagement, there was evidence of mutual support along with shared complementary racial perspectives. Despite these optimistic results supporting the benefits of directly confronting race, Rawlins (2009) reminds us of the following, "Most Whites and Blacks experience contrasting awareness of racialized consciousness" (p. 148). He advances three essential tasks when engaging in cross-racial friendships: acknowledge the existing racism in the relationship, understand that racism has many forms which are often asymmetrical in terms of perception, and confront the resultant implications such as privilege. This is profoundly instructive and challenges the intergroup contact theory (Allport, 1954) which posits that sharing a common goal and equal status are conditions that if met could lead to positive cross-group contact and relationships. The asymmetrical nature that characterizes the differing positionality of members of the majority White group and those of the minority Black groups will not disappear, even in light of the best intentions of all involved members. This message is reiterated by Park

(2012) in that "common goals do not fully subsume the inequality, misunderstandings, and conflicts linked to race" (p. 588).

Adult education scholars have taken this idea of acknowledging and addressing racism a step further by advocating for a pedagogy that is centered on African principles. In the Handbook of Race and Adult Education (Sheared et al., 2010), a model that promotes self-healing for Black people is introduced that includes what is called the "New Vulnerability". Under this approach, "the individual no longer reacts to the oppressive actions of the dominant culture but instead comes to realize his or her choices, living 'in action' with the world as opposed to reacting to negative stimuli that historically have affected African Americans' health and well-being" (p. 223-224). This is not only a significant consideration for sustaining cross-racial relationships and friendships, but can be considered a necessary emancipatory tool that can help transition Black people from their feelings of resentment or racial battle fatigue to new spaces of healing. Additionally, this New Vulnerability stage of the Self Affirming Soul Healing Africans (SASHA) model aligns with race-based sensitivity rejection (Page-Gould et al., 2014). Rather than allowing anxiety around negative cross-racial interactions to drive their future behavior, Black people, and other marginalized individuals, can employ this approach and make the choice to leverage their personal stories to inform and educate others. In analyzing their own stories and those of others with whom they choose to engage, they can open up more possibilities for cross-racial relationships to thrive and be self-affirming because of a shared willingness to be vulnerable and express fears and mistrust. "Through meaningful dialogue we will develop compassion for ourselves and for group members, allowing our personal triggers to expand our self-awareness…This

safety allowed us to remain present with our feelings without projecting these feelings onto group members" (Sheared et al., 2010, p. 226-227). This notion of safety is crucial when engaging in cross-racial conversations about race or when attempting to establish new cross-racial friendships, and so is the notion of trust.

A final consideration involves trust and how it influences the success of cross-racial relationships. Generalized trust, though abstract, refers to the idea that most people are deserving of trust, and is also correlated to greater acceptance and lower prejudice, in encounters between diverse peoples (van der Linden et al., 2017). Although frequent contact between different racial and ethnic groups can help develop feelings of trust and thus reduce prejudice, consideration must be given to how to build outgroup trust which refers to one's attitude toward different others. According to Granger's (2002) exploration of friendship between Black and White females, trust accorded in a mutual process was critical in the maintenance of their cross-racial friendships. By way of storytelling, the women were able to build trust with one another by sharing openly and honestly. The salient point here is that trust must operate in the relationship in give and take fashion as the friendship partners negotiate any surfacing issues around inequality that will undoubtedly emerge as a result of the positional asymmetry aforementioned. The study conducted by Plummer et al. (2016) however provides contradicting data around trust and its enactment within cross-racial friendship. Using survey data and focus groups with Black and White participants, researchers examined cross-racial friendship patterns among adults. Of the three emergent themes, levels of trust and intimacy were constitutive of the findings. Participants revealed that "they experienced lower levels of trust and intimacy with cross-racial friends than with same-race friends"

(p. 487). Although the researchers credit the history of racism in America for this resultant phenomenon, I wonder whether the study looked deeply enough at the nature of these cross-racial friendships. We have seen that such relationships do not thrive on their own by mere intergroup contact, but that they must be nurtured with a willingness to confront racism in the spirit of collaboration, understanding and commitment. Unless we can ascertain the nature of how the participants regarded their friendships in relation to investment of time and energy, it is implausible to assume and generalize that only low levels of trust are achievable in cross-racial friendships.

Still, this study and others in the literature provide us with informative insights to consider as we delve into the possibilities that mutual vulnerability could perhaps help increase feelings of interconnectedness within cross-racial relationships. Knowing that a lack of closeness or depth and social reciprocity is problematized within intergroup relations, our charge is to identify ways to provide spaces for mutual efforts of openness, connection, intimacy and trust to occur across races and ethnicities (Okech & Champe, 2008; Williams & Johnson, 2011). Pettigrew (1998) advocates that "friendship potential" require individuals to "learn more about outgroups, change their existing attitudes and behaviors, create affective ties, and reappraise their own group" (as cited by Orta, 2013, p. 2). It is the need for affective dimensions that warrants special attention and which has heretofore been predominantly ignored in the literature. There is a crucial emotional component which links mutual vulnerability to human interconnectedness to cross-racial relationships. Confronting racism will no doubt bring to the forefront emotions of great intensity. But if we allow participants who choose to come together under a common goal being granted equal status to the extent possible in the shared physical space, then

we have the opportunity of additionally providing a safe emotional space for them to openly acknowledge their own personal fears and mistrust pertaining to their racial perspectives.

Chapter Summary

This chapter provides a literature review on three major concepts related to the research topic: vulnerability, human interconnectedness, and cross-racial relationships. In examining the multiplicity of views presented in the literature, vulnerability is an essential human condition. Humans possess the agency to manage the fragilities and tensions that accompany being vulnerable and exposed to others. We can engage in relationships in ways that are productive and generative. Vulnerability therefore is not a weakness, but a resource with incredible potential for humans to meaningfully connect with others. If we as humans can be intentional in our expression of vulnerability, always keeping in mind the well-being of the other, then we have a greater chance of improving social relations and elevating feelings of interconnectedness.

The portrayal of human interconnectedness in the literature positions the affective dimension of relationships as paramount, with a focus on feelings related to comfort and well-being. What has the potential to bind humans together is this very idea of emotionally identifying with one another. When considering cross-racial relationships, possibilities abound for the social distance that alienates diverse individuals from one another to be reduced. Trust must be established in a setting of mutual cooperation and respect so that any negative feelings can be combatted with feelings of acceptance and belonging. If social distance is lessened, there is potential for reduced negative stereotypes and prejudice.

Vulnerability is not a resource if it is only one-sided. Human interconnectedness cannot exist without the other and so efforts to deepen any feelings of comfort and well-being must be made reciprocally. Cross-racial relationships can only thrive when both parties across the racial or ethnic divide commit to respecting the historically, culturally, socially and politically situated identity of the other. If vulnerability carries potential for improving our interpersonal relationships, then vulnerability, or perhaps a new vulnerability, has potential for humans to connect meaningfully across races and ethnicities.

III. METHODOLOGY

The objective of this study was an exploration of mutual vulnerability in order to determine its potential for deepening feelings of human interconnectedness across different races and ethnicities. The study sought to address the overarching topic: *the individual and collective experiences of mutual vulnerability toward deepening feelings of human interconnectedness in cross-racial relationships.* The research question collaboratively generated with the co-inquirers was as follows: How do we use vulnerability to explore and express our deep-rooted fears and mistrust in a way that draws out courage for the reciprocation of that vulnerability? We also generated the following sub-questions. What are those fears? What are commonalities in how we practice vulnerability? How can these commonalities help us move beyond our fears and increase our feelings of interconnectedness in cross-racial contexts? This chapter will address the following components: overview of research design, site and participant selection, role of the researcher, data collection and management, data analysis, stages of collaborative human inquiry, strategies for validity, credibility and authenticity, possibility for theory-building, and limitations and delimitations.

Overview of Research Design

A qualitative methodology grounded in a social constructivist approach was most suitable for this study because I sought to focus on the perspectives of the individuals in my study and employ a methodology that encourages them to participate fully and express themselves freely in a manner that reduces the power differential between me as the researcher and them as participants (Creswell, 2013). However, I recognize the challenge that comes with examining vulnerability within such a sensitive context as that

of cross-racial or cross-ethnic relationships. Participants may experience emotions that prevent them from being genuinely vulnerable. Therefore, I chose to use what I call "collaborative human inquiry" as a way to open the door to engaging authentically in difficult conversations and providing participants with increased opportunity for agency in the research endeavor. Creating such a collaborative environment led to a greater likelihood of deeper understanding of our thoughts and behaviors as they pertained to the research topic. Collaborative human inquiry is inspired by co-operative inquiry (Heron, 1996) and collaborative inquiry (Bray, Lee, Smith & Yorks, 2000; Group for Collaborative Inquiry, 1994). It fosters research that is not merely conducted on people, or for people, but alongside people.

Cooperative inquiry was developed by Peter Heron (1996). Elements of co-operative inquiry important to my research included (a) a person-centered approach where all participants are empowered as "co-researchers" (p. 19) and (b) a reliance on their "full range of human sensibilities" (p. 20) to advance the exploration of the topic under study. The first element addresses mutual vulnerability, the topic under study. I could not ask others to be vulnerable if I were not willing to be vulnerable myself. Therefore, my willingness to co-construct knowledge alongside the participants, where both researcher and participants have shared and reciprocal vulnerability, was essential. Importantly, mutual vulnerability was explored for its potential to elevate feelings of human interconnectedness among humans. Since mutual vulnerability and interconnectedness are inherently relational, cooperative inquiry, and collaborative human inquiry by extension, establishes research conditions that focus on building peer relationships and sustaining "authentic collaboration" throughout all stages of inquiry

(Heron, 1996, p. 61). The second element foregrounds the sensibilities of the participants. Given that I was exploring mutual vulnerability in the context of cross-racial or cross-ethnic relationships, it was paramount to employ a methodology that addresses the highly emotional and sensitive nature of the inquiry, as well as respects the culturally different ways of expressing vulnerability respective to each individual. This type of inquiry encouraged participants to share their thoughts and feelings through dramatized methods such as storytelling, metaphor, poetry or visual arts. As part of the norms that were established by the group, participants also used a compass representing four quadrants to express how they were engaging with the process. The compass, used in Courageous Conversations protocols (Singleton, 2014), states that people deal with issues of race emotionally, intellectually, morally or socially. Consequently, the compass, which will be described more fully in chapter 4, helped participants to describe their state of being, at any point during the research study, whether they were feeling, thinking, believing or doing. This availability of a variety of data presentational formats provided an opportunity for healthy and culturally affirming expression of emotions, beliefs and opinions within a context that was potentially sensitive for those involved.

Social constructivism is theory of knowledge and an approach toward research design highly aligned with collaborative human inquiry. According to Heron (1996), it is unethical to conduct research on individuals without their explicit agreement and active participation concerning all research decisions. Under social constructivism, the researcher employs an inductive method for collecting and analyzing data that requires consensus with those being researched (Creswell, 2013). Heron (1996) emphasizes the ontological belief that "multiple realities are constructed through our lived experiences

and interactions with others" (p. 36). I draw on this in collaborative human inquiry to foreground participative knowing, which supports the notion that humans value connection with others. From an epistemological standpoint, participative knowing acknowledges that data generated from individual experiences is co-constructed via interactions with others, which constitute multiple ways of understanding reality. This valuing of connection and interaction with others, underscores the axiology characteristic of social constructivism. As Heron (1996) writes, "Knowing is mutual awakening, mutual participative awareness" (p. 14). Rather than assume the traditional qualitative role of "researcher and primary instrument of the study" (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p. 113), I attempted to immerse myself in the research using methods which generated data that were truly co-constructed. This preference for increased interconnectedness between the researcher and participants serving as co-inquirers mirrors the transformative potential for deeper interconnectedness between all humans within the context of cross-racial relationships.

Cooperative and collaborative human inquiry extend beyond social constructivist beliefs by insisting on a highly participative paradigm, also known as the "fifth inquiry paradigm" (Heron, 1996, p. 10). Epistemologically, participative knowing based on co-construction of reality must be reciprocal as participants mutually engage with each other. Due to its focus on "dialogue, parity and reciprocity in all its phases" (p. 11), participants are empowered with agency as co-inquirers and are able to exercise participative decision-making throughout all stages of the research. Another element of co-operative inquiry that is important to collaborative human inquiry are the three strands that must be understood and mediated throughout the research process: the inquiry strand,

the collaboration strand, and the emotional and interpersonal strand (Heron, 1996). The inquiry stand pertains to the initiating researcher's ability to help the participants understand the method of inquiry well enough to be able to participate. The collaborative strand ensures that each participant contributes to the decision-making process and that authentic collaboration is achieved. The last strand fosters a spirit of awareness of the challenges that will arise from participating in the inquiry such as stress or tensions. This awareness can evolve into acceptance of such challenges which eventually helps participants derive joy from the process no matter how fraught with emotions. The ability of each individual co-researcher to navigate these strands, with the support of the facilitator, as they engage in the research cycles will shape overall outcomes.

Heron (1996) does not champion co-operative inquiry as a methodology strict in its execution and adherence to these specified parameters. There is no single correct way to conduct co-operative inquiry. Nonetheless, Bray et al. (2000) made the choice to use the term collaborative inquiry, originally developed by the Group for Collaborative Inquiry, instead to avoid being held to a pre-determined approach, which would afford them a greater degree of flexibility in how their study unfolded over time. I concur with this manner and nomenclature for conducting a participant-oriented inquiry because much flexibility is needed when delving into the vulnerable realm of one's thoughts and feelings within a highly sensitive and culturally diverse context.

Adopting the term collaborative *human* inquiry appropriately underscores what has been revealed in the literature review around what it means to be human in terms of vulnerability, interconnectedness, and cross-racial relationships. Brown (2012) informs us that vulnerability is an essential human experience. Linklater (2009, 2010) advises

that to become an evolved global citizenry, we must make efforts at empathic attunement toward greater human interconnectedness. Rawlins (2009) cautions the need to respect the human sense of self when engaging in cross-racial or cross-ethnic relationships. Placing the emphasis on the very human nature of this research endeavor seemed to hold the collaborative group accountable for treating each other as full humans throughout the inquiry process. My goal in calling this collaborative human inquiry was to emphasize being human as a grounding anchor for the three constructs while bringing in vulnerability and interconnectedness and cross-racial relationships under one umbrella.

Site and Participant Selection

Purposeful sampling was employed to recruit participants who met the following criteria: 1) represented a diversity of individuals across racial and ethnic lines, 2) expressed willingness to explore the phenomenon of mutual vulnerability in the context of cross-racial and cross-ethnic relationships, 3) possessed characteristics that would lead to successful implementation of collaborative human inquiry, and 4) identified as female. Regarding the first criterion, a robust variety of race and ethnicities was essential to appropriately address the proposed research topic around mutual vulnerability and interconnectedness in the context of cross-racial relationships. In the second criterion, willingness to explore their own vulnerability within such a highly sensitive context was also critical. Due to the emotional risk inherent in exploring one's vulnerabilities before others, selected participants were limited to those who had experience reflecting on their identity in a cross-racial context. Recruitment of individuals with this specific experience assisted with the third criterion of needing those who possess characteristics that would lead to successful implementation of collaborative human inquiry. Through self-

reflection, such experienced individuals would be able to take in new information and reflect critically to increase their personal awareness, knowledge, and development. Their capacity for reflection shows a greater likelihood to learn the co-operative inquiry procedures and skills as described by Heron (1996) such as reframing and dynamic congruence. Reframing requires an ability to evaluate assumptions and consider alternative perspectives. Dynamic congruence concerns the ability to examine actions and behavior for any lack of congruence and make adjustments. Collaborative human inquiry, by extension, unfolds in multiple research cycles consisting of recursive stages of reflection and action. Individuals who have experience with critical thinking and reflection have greater capacity for these skills. For the fourth criterion, recruiting participants who identified as female would help protect the space for open sharing and vulnerability if members of a single gender were involved. Establishing trust among the participants may also be more manageable among individuals of the same gender (Haselhuhn, Kennedy, Kray, Van Zant, & Schweitzer, 2015). Since I participated as a fully immersed researcher, then the preference was for participants to represent the female gender.

In order to recruit participants, I emailed six individuals who I know and who have critically reflected on their own positionality by, for example, having participated in or facilitated cultural and racial awareness training. The email (See Appendix A) described the research inquiry and general expectations as they related to the study. From the interested responses, I recruited five adult participants who represented various races and ethnicities and who were between the age range of 25-65 years old. The rationale for the number of participants is based on research showing that fewer group

members leads to greater trust and cohesion among the group, while larger numbers of individuals showed negative effects such as increased stress (Soboroff, 2012). Additionally, this sample is large enough to have the necessary representation of diverse race and ethnicities but small enough so that each participant can fully contribute as a co-inquirer. The rationale for the age range is to be inclusive of adults across the life span but focusing on those who are in the middle adult years. Once I had the five interested candidates, I attempted to conduct a phone interview with each in order to discuss why they believed they would be a good fit for the study. During the interview, I looked for the following criteria: passion about the research topic, willingness to express themselves vulnerably, experience reflecting on their identity, ability to tolerate ambiguity, and good listening skills. Prior to inviting potential participants to attend the orientation meeting, I conducted a telephone interview with each individual to discuss the criteria. Most unfortunately, during the phone interview stage, one interested participant had to back out due to being on vacation during the time that the orientation meetings were scheduled. Moving forward with the four remaining participants, each was invited to a one-hour orientation session where they learned about the collaborative human inquiry process.

At this orientation meeting, I provided the interested participants with a handout explaining what collaborative human inquiry is and what their role would be during the research process. In terms of what they would need to know regarding the method of inquiry, I provided information on the background, the research cycles and stages, the fourfold way of knowing, the structure for data collection and analysis, and the validity strategies. I also briefly introduced the research topic at this time. Upon completion of the orientation, the participants were able to decide to commit or not. Those who chose

to commit to the study signed an informed consent form (See Appendix B) which delineated the expectations as a participant of the study, as well as their options regarding the study, and most importantly, the steps that I would take in order to protect their confidentiality. Unfortunately, although all four participants signed the informed consent form, one additional participant backed out immediately before the initiation meeting due to unforeseen family obligations. Given that the research study had already begun, I proceeded with three participants in addition to myself. Even though the number of participants was ultimately less than what I desired, the diversity of ethnicities among our intimate group of four was still broad and relevant enough for the study.

With regards to site selection, all meetings were held at neutral sites with the exception of the first research meeting held at my own home. This decision was made collectively by the group in order to infuse a personal touch as we embarked on the first research cycle. More information regarding meeting sites will be shared in the next chapter.

Special Considerations

The aim of bringing together a mix of individuals representing different races or ethnicities raised three key issues which need to be addressed: the cross-racial vs. cross-ethnic distinction, White representation, and the introduction of multiple cultures. Although the literature has revealed a seemingly synonymous use of the terms cross-racial and cross-ethnic, it is important to emphasize the distinction. Cross-racial is the term used to foreground the issue of race, and to problematize racism in our society. For this reason, cross-racial is the chosen term used in the title of this study. However, cross-ethnic is a more appropriate term referring to the ethnicity with which a person actually

identifies for themselves. During recruitment of participants, the goal was to select individuals representing a variety of ethnicities, which would inevitably reflect a variety of races. Within this collection of various races or ethnicities, it was anticipated that those identifying as White may need a space to grapple with any notions of White privilege that may surface during conversations centered around race. Keeping this in mind, I used the one-on-one interviews as an opportunity to personally check in with the one White female participant. In fact, all participants were able to share concerns with the initiating researcher at any point during the inquiry. As individuals from different ethnicities engaging with each other, it was important to consider the cultural nuances that differed from person to person. Such differences manifested themselves somewhat in communication style during our respective expressions of vulnerability as it pertained to the topic of this study. It was my job as facilitator and initiating researcher to ensure that respect was maintained at all stages of inquiry for the ethnicities present, that acceptance of the cultural differences that abounded was continually sustained, and that support was appropriately provided for all voices in the group.

Role of the Researcher

Co-operative inquiry can be implemented as a methodology in full form or partial form. In full form inquiry, all individuals involved in the study are simultaneously and fully immersed as co-subjects and co-inquirers. Slightly different, a partial form inquiry requires that all participating individuals act as co-inquirers, but excuses the initiating researcher from being fully immersed as co-subject. This study, which used collaborative human inquiry, employed the full form. The rationale for this was to include my own experiences as an Asian woman alongside the experiences of the co-inquirers each

representative of their self-identified ethnicity. This is not to say that they spoke for all members in their ethnic group, but simply to indicate that the selection criterion of having perspectives from diverse ethnicities was met. Nonetheless, it was important that my own experiences did not supersede their experiences. But even with the best intentions at memoing, the researcher inevitably brings in their "life concepts and values to each event" (Bray et al., 2000). As the initiating researcher, I worked hard to ensure that the knowledge and meaning constructed from the study arose equitably from the experiences of each contributing participant fully embedded as co-subjects and co-inquirers.

Facilitator

Having chosen to implement a full form inquiry allowed me to share the role of facilitator with my co-inquirers and co-subjects throughout the course of the study, while still maintaining the role of initiating researcher and organizer. By sharing the facilitator role with my participants, I was able to maximize my energy by serving as the initiating researcher who facilitates the collaborative human inquiry process primarily at the outset, but who transferred that role ultimately to other co-inquirers during the study. As such, my intent was to be as thoroughly engaged alongside the participants and to participate fully by showing the same degree of vulnerability as we navigated the research stages. Doing this allowed me to minimize any power differential involved with being facilitator and initiating researcher in this participatory approach. I started out clearly as the individual who decided on the research topic, but gradually released control to the co-inquirers beginning with the development of the research questions. Giving up some of this power made the other co-inquirers feel empowered to help guide the direction of the study as they took on the facilitator role in turn.

During group and one-on-one interactions, individual beliefs and values were honored and mediated through a shared commitment to mutual vulnerability. The definition for mutual vulnerability is our reliance on each other during shared activities to take risks, embrace uncertainty and face emotional disclosure. The crucial moment when I needed to model vulnerability for the participants was during the initiation meeting, which followed the orientation meeting previously described. During this meeting, participants engaged in activities that helped us get to know each other and to begin building relationships with one another. It was important to begin establishing conditions for trust-building in order to create a safe environment where participants felt able to express themselves vulnerably without fear of judgement. As we engaged in these relationship-building activities, it was important that I model for them early on in the process what vulnerability looks like according to my experiences. As the study unfolded, we were able to witness how the other co-inquirers viewed and demonstrated their own personal vulnerability. According to Brown (2012), I had to demonstrate that I could accept uncertainty. I had to show that I was willing to take emotional risks and face emotional exposure. I needed to sustain this level of vulnerability as I facilitated the dialogue, and modeled for others how to facilitate such dialogue that transpired during the regular group meetings. My facilitator role however was sustained during the individual semi-structured interviews. This was an opportunity to engage in one-on-one conversation with each participant in which case they also needed to feel that my vulnerability was genuine.

Efforts were made at fostering a non-hierarchical environment where participants had decision-making capacity as co-inquirers, but it was unavoidable that my

responsibilities during implementation of the inquiry would vary from theirs in terms of process facilitation. My role as a facilitator was advantageous for two reasons: a) to facilitate the regular group meetings as we engaged in difficult and emotionally charged dialogue and b) to facilitate the individual semi-structured interviews that provided a separate space for participants to dialogue in a one-on-one setting. Therefore, the two-pronged goal of accessing the participants' individual and collective experiences in a large group setting, and offering them individual semi-structured interviews, was to provide an avenue for them to express themselves in multiple contexts while also granting me as the initiating researcher an opportunity to triangulate data from more than one source.

Whether in one-on-one or large group settings, it was important for me to work with the participants on creating norms that were to guide our time together, and more importantly, our interactions with one another. Understanding these norms additionally assisted the participants as they began to assume a facilitator role alongside me. During the three-hour initiation meeting aforementioned, we democratically created such norms and guidelines for our collaborative work. Singleton (2014) provides a useful framework that was suggested to participants, which includes the following agreements: stay engaged, experience discomfort, speak your truth, and expect and accept non-closure.

During the regular group meetings, I had to give my attention to the inquiry strand, the collaboration strand, and the emotional and interpersonal strand (Heron, 1996). If I stayed committed to helping participants understand the methodology, ensuring that they each contribute equally to the decision-making process, and promoting a spirit of acceptance of the challenges that inevitably arose, there was a better chance

they would be able to successfully navigate the accompanying emotions. Since the ability of each individual co-inquirer to navigate these strands as they engaged in the research cycles would shape overall outcomes, I believed it was important to share this facilitator role. I asked participants to assist in facilitating certain tasks during the meetings, which rotated from meeting to meeting so all could feel that they had shared ownership in the research endeavor.

Fully Immersed Researcher and Subject

As a fully immersed researcher and fully immersed co-inquirer working alongside my participants, the need to employ critical reflection in my research endeavor was amplified. "Critical reflection involves a critique of the presuppositions on which our beliefs have been built" (Bray et al., 2000, p. 9). The process of being explicit about my positionality was supported through the use of memos where I documented my thoughts and ideas about the data emerging from implementing collaborative human inquiry. Knowing that my own racialized and ethnic identity shapes how I perceive the world around me as well as my interactions with others, I wrote informal memos as a way to heighten my awareness of how my worldview might influence the study. The process of writing memos to myself to explicitly acknowledge my positionality helped me stay more open to receiving their stories and perspectives in an unfiltered fashion as I shared my own. Using this strategy of structured reflexivity suggested by Ravitch and Carl (2016), I feel I was able to keep in mind the integrity of the study by being more aware of any personal assumptions that may have unconsciously influenced how the stages of inquiry unfolded during the multiple research cycles.

My Assumptions

Part and parcel of being critically reflective is being aware of underlying assumptions that are embedded in the decisions made concerning research design. Even in my best attempts to design a qualitative study that is structurally and conceptually sound, it remains an important act of research ethics to bring awareness to such assumptions (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). With respect to this study, I can share four assumptions that revolve around vulnerability which may have unknowingly influenced my decisions: 1) vulnerability is a strength, 2) women are more likely to express vulnerability, 3) vulnerability that is expressed mutually can increase feelings of well-being and comfort, and 4) there is a link between vulnerability and cross-racial relationships where individuals feel increased human interconnectedness.

The first assumption reveals my overarching belief that vulnerability is a resource and not a weakness. Such an assumption might blind me to the struggles that participants will inevitably encounter as they attempt to show their vulnerability in an emotionally charged context like that of cross-racial relationships. The second assumption that women are more likely than men to express their vulnerability explains my preference in purposefully selecting females because I believe they have a greater propensity or willingness to be vulnerable. This assumption is shaped by my positionality as a woman and my own willingness to explore vulnerability in this sensitive context. The third assumption is that a causal link exists between mutual vulnerability and feelings of well-being and comfort. This belief can be particularly detrimental if I am unwilling to entertain other potential causes that may not relate to vulnerability on any level. Lastly, the final assumption that a causal link also exists between vulnerability and meaningful

cross-racial relationships asserts that if persons from various racial or ethnic groups learn how to be vulnerable with one another, meaningful and generative relationships will ensue. By intentionally shedding light on these assumptions, I hope to increase the degree of critical reflection associated with this study. By extension, I hope that I did justice to my role as a facilitator and as a fully immersed researcher in maximizing the individual and collective experiences of the participants and minimizing the impact of my personal beliefs.

Stages of Collaborative Human Inquiry

Inspired by Heron (1996), each inquiry cycle is comprised of four stages: initial reflection, action, full immersion, and second reflection. During the first initial reflection, or pre-reflection, stage, the co-inquirers work together to select the focus of the inquiry, decide on the parameters of the inquiry approach, and develop a plan for the action stage to follow. This stage may involve propositional and presentational beliefs around how to co-construct knowledge as it pertains to embracing mutual vulnerability in the context of cross-racial relationships.

The action phase requires experiential learning as the co-inquirers engage in some action that will inform the chosen focus for that particular inquiry cycle. Participants reserve the right to decide whether this action phase will consist of a "group process inside inquiry" or a "group-based inside inquiry" (p. 43). The former requires that the group remain intact as they engage in the action stage of each research cycle. The latter adopts multiple ways in which the group can engage in action, such as individually, in pairs, or in smaller groups. Both formats require individual and collective investigation of the phenomenon under study, but the latter offers more flexibility in how the activities

are structured. During this stage, the co-inquirers are incorporating practical beliefs about the focus of the inquiry.

The full immersion stage refers to a "state of mind and being" (p. 72) where the co-inquirers are entrenched in the experiences of the action stage and are developing inquiry skills such as how to be fully present and attentive to the experiences of others, how to bracket any preconceived constructs about people and the world, and how to manage their emotions without unnecessary attachment to the action while still behaving in an intentional and committed manner. Heron (1996) refers to these as "special inquiry skills" (p. 58) which he believes develop as a by-product of being fully engaged in the inquiry process, ignited during the action stage which precedes and then transitions into this stage of being attuned to oneself and one's process of knowing that results from being present in that experience. This stage draws in their experiential beliefs about the focus of the inquiry and is considered the primary point of reference for the inquiry cycle in implementation.

During the second reflection, or post-reflection, stage of the inquiry cycle in question, the co-inquirers share the data produced from the action stage. As they present, study, and interpret these data and extract possible themes, they consider how this new knowledge informs the selected focus of the inquiry. This leads to the planning of the next research cycle and action stage where they may pursue the same focus or choose another focus related to the phenomenon under study. The co-inquirers can also use this stage to make adjustments to procedures around the action stage. Now that there is a reference base of knowledge gained from the first inquiry cycle, this second reflection is characterized by more informed propositional and presentational beliefs about the new

knowledge. It is the interplay among all four forms of knowing over multiple cycles of research that contribute to the research outcomes being valid and well-founded (Heron, 1996).

Data Collection and Management

In order to capture the unfiltered experiences of the participants, data collection consisted primarily of community-based oral testimony. Ravitch and Carl (2016) provide us with the following definition: "This approach relies on extended, largely unstructured conversations with individuals and groups through which a carefully selected range of participants tell their own stories in their own words" (p. 176). A community-based approach lends itself well to collaborative human inquiry since it minimizes the role of the researcher and permits the participants to respond to each other's narrations, thus reinforcing their active role as co-inquirers. Since the expectation was for participants to face and embrace their vulnerability while interacting with those from other races and ethnicities, a collaborative environment had to be created where all felt equally enabled and empowered to share freely, and for those efforts to be reciprocated. Additionally, it was imperative to minimize the power differential that naturally exists between researcher and participants. Granting agency in decision-making to the participants at almost all stages of the research created a sense of true cooperation and collaboration. For the purposes of generating valuable data around mutual vulnerability, this intentional removal of status markers seemed to produce more authentic contributions. The study by Gibson et al. (2018) on self-disclosure and perceived vulnerability illustrated that participants expressed the need to feel supported in disclosing, rather than threatened because of a difference in status. Allport's (1954) Intergroup Contact Hypothesis

provides theoretical support that relationships between diverse individuals have a better chance at flourishing if they enjoy equal status while pursuing a common goal. Collaborative human inquiry as a methodology created the space needed for participants to engage in a community-based approach where oral testimony consisted of their stories, told in their own words. My hopes that this non-hierarchical environment would be conducive to greater likelihood of uncovering data that would authentically address the research topic and research questions generated by the co-inquirers were met.

Storytelling, in its formal and informal sense, was the primary source of data collection for this study. In reference to an existing example of co-operative inquiry in the literature, Heron (1996) states that stories are powerful because they serve as "catalysts to new understanding and action" (p. 46). Engaging in this format of mutual sharing aligns with the concept of participative knowing. As participants worked to co-construct knowledge in collective fashion, the perspectives from the personal stories and anecdotes shared were further illumined to shed additional light on the topic of study. Co-operative and collaborative inquiry unfold over multiple research cycles which themselves include stages of reflection followed by action and more reflection. Storytelling was particularly salient as a data collection strategy during the second reflection stage. After all participants shared their personal stories or viewpoints resulting from the agreed upon action, the group then had a chance to share new stories based on the individual stories. This dynamic technique helped us to notice patterns among the stories and to make connections that underscore what is similar and what is different with regards to the vulnerable experiences shared. Reason and Hawkins (1988) offer a structured way to classify these new stories that have the potential to unlock

themes not so apparent in the first rendition: reply, echo, re-creation, and reflection (as cited in Heron, 1996). This approach for collecting data reinforces the collaborative spirit so rooted in such a participant-oriented inquiry. In addition to informal and formal storytelling, other sources of data emerged in these collective spaces, including creative presentation formats such as poetry, or structured presentation formats such as the use of sentence stems. Sentence stems are prompts that require completion to express a full thought or idea. Due to the emotional nature of this work, it was feasible to expect that co-inquirers might initially choose a less direct way to express themselves vulnerably until trust could be established and fostered among the group. What was surprising and most welcomed was their eventual desire to share in more direct ways such as that of completing sentence stems.

A secondary source of data was the use of individual semi-structured interviews between the participants and myself as the initiating researcher. This data collection strategy temporarily removed me from being a fully immersed co-subject since I needed to focus on my role as the researcher and focus my inquiry on the experiences of the participants rather than mine. The rationale for the individual interviews is to provide the participants with a private space to discuss any sensitive or emotional items. As Heron (1996) points out, "The facilitator, through all these stages, is supporting the group to manifest a basic level of competence in both identifying and managing emotional states" (p. 70). Bray et al. (2000) advocate for the use of learning journals where participants can capture their thoughts and feelings as they engage in the multiple stages of action and reflection characteristic of the chosen inquiry model. Although I also planned to utilize learning journals throughout our respective stages of collaborative human inquiry, it was

ultimately up to the participants to decide how they wished to organize and incorporate these journals. Each participant received a composition notebook to serve as their learning journal. Participants were given the choice to refer to their learning journals during the individual interviews to share what they had documented during the research process in their role as co-inquirers. Although these journals themselves did not constitute a primary source of data, the insights that participants shared during the interviews uniquely highlighted their individual experiences and thoughts that did contribute to the overall collective construction of knowledge. This individual interview approach may seem counterintuitive to the notion of co-operative and collaborative human inquiry and the prevailing tenet of authentic collaboration, but the dedicated time to meet outside of the collective space helped me to gauge motivation and readiness to pursue and persevere. Although there were guiding semi-structured questions, the participants as co-inquirers were able to decide what and how much they shared during the interviews.

In order to capture the individual and collective experiences of the participants around vulnerability in the context of cross-racial relationships, the following data collection steps were incorporated to provide us with a workable timeline. At the three-hour initiation meeting, we scheduled three regular meetings over the course of four months in order to carry out three research cycles. Although these regular meetings were scheduled for three hours each, we continued for an additional half hour on occasion in order to fully complete a research cycle stage. Each research cycle consisted of four stages, similar to Heron's (1996) co-operative inquiry process: reflection, action, immersion, and reflection. During the same initiation meeting, our goal was to reflect on

the research topic and decide on our first action to explore. However, it became evident that we preferred to spend the entire initiation meeting engaging in activities to develop trust and focus on building relationships. The plan then was to dedicate each subsequent regular meeting to implementing the methodology across the four stages of each research cycle. In other words, when we reconvened for the first regular meeting, our plan was to reflect on the research topic and questions, decide on the initial action that will help us answer those research questions, determine how best to engage in that action to activate the full immersion stage, which would then be followed by a second reflection. The co-inquirers would share their experiences in the form of formal and informal stories, or other alternative ways such as poetry, metaphors, or visual arts, according to their preference. Formal storytelling occurred during the action stage of the inquiry cycle, while informal storytelling emerged in both the pre- and post-reflection stages sandwiching the action. The end of the meeting would be dedicated to examining any themes that surfaced from our time together and would be examined using Heron's (1996) fourfold model of knowing. These themes would inform the next cycle of reflection, action, immersion and reflection. In other words, at the end of each regular meeting, we planned to identify the next action to explore. This research cycle would then repeat two more times for a total of three research cycles over the course of four months. However, I learned that research does not systematically unfold as originally planned. A varied and unanticipated amount of time was required for each of the different stages within each research cycle, which caused the cycles to overlap across the regular meetings rather than neatly conclude at the end of each meeting. A more detailed

description of how each of the three regular meetings did progress will follow in the next chapter.

The plan was for all meetings to take place at a neutral site in the community where participants could feel comfortable and we could have privacy. With regards to the individual semi-structured interviews, two brief sessions were scheduled with me. Each session lasted approximately 30 minutes and was scheduled in September and December, respectively. During the sessions, participants were asked to share how they are navigating the research process as a co-subject and co-inquirer. Like the group meetings, my plan was for the location to be at a local site in the community that affords both comfort and privacy. However, the participants opted for the sessions to occur virtually using an online conferencing platform called Zoom, which better accommodated each participant's needs and schedule. Lastly, participants attended a three-hour concluding meeting where we engaged in final data analysis and shared final reflections on the overall inquiry process. A timeline is provided to bring clarity to the data collection steps as described above and as ultimately revised. (See Appendix C).

With regards to data management, I recorded each meeting as well as each interview using an audio recording device, which was stored in a locked space in between gatherings. I opted to pay for services to transcribe the data that were collected from each collaborative human inquiry stage meeting. Prior to using the transcription services, all personally identifiable data were removed. All data and corresponding transcriptions were saved on my personal computer which is password protected. All handwritten documents were stored in folders kept under lock and key in the same space as the audio recording device in my home office. Since I live alone, I can assure that the locked space

was only accessible by me. Confidentiality was maintained throughout all stages of the research process and beyond, with the use of pseudonyms for all participants. Data were additionally stored securely on the Texas State University TRACS website that was monitored and accessed only by me and my faculty advisor.

Data Analysis

Since collaborative human inquiry unfolds over recursive stages of reflection and action, with participants acting as co-inquirers, data analysis was a part of the multiple research cycles. Our collective goal was to immerse ourselves in qualitative data collection and analysis, based on an integrative approach. According to Ravitch and Carl (2016), a key feature of this integration across all stages of the research design is that analysis is formative, reflexive and collaborative. Due to the recursive nature of co-operative inquiry (Heron, 1996) and collaborative human inquiry, analysis of data was inevitably ongoing and iterative. The inquiry process was enacted over multiple stages of pre-reflection, action, and post-reflection in which participants moved individually and collectively through three research cycles. This repetitive and inductive process provided an arena for the researcher and participants to simultaneously listen to and challenge each other's presentation and interpretation of the data in order to uncover the essence of mutual vulnerability in the context of cross-racial relationships.

Data were additionally analyzed through Heron's (1996) fourfold way of knowing, which consists of the following forms of knowledge: experiential, presentational, propositional and practical (Figure 2). Experiential knowing refers to our encounters with others through perception and empathy. This knowledge is then communicated in presentational format that can be manifested in a variety of expressive

ways such as storytelling, poetry, metaphor or visual arts. Presentational knowledge leads to the formation of propositional knowledge, which refers to the language of theories or concepts. Presentational knowledge refers to how co-inquirers shared their experiences of vulnerability while propositional knowledge reflects the terms and concepts assigned to what was presented. Practical knowledge is considered the ultimate form of knowledge since it connotes a change in practice as a result of the learning that transpires. What is described by Heron (1996) as an "interdependent up-hierarchy" (p. 32), this multi-dimensional view of knowing posits experiential knowing at the base and practical knowing at the very top. This model represents an extended epistemology where knowledge is perceived as more than that which is captured traditionally as propositional. Rather than valuing knowledge in this single manner, valid knowledge is the congruence among these four dimensions.

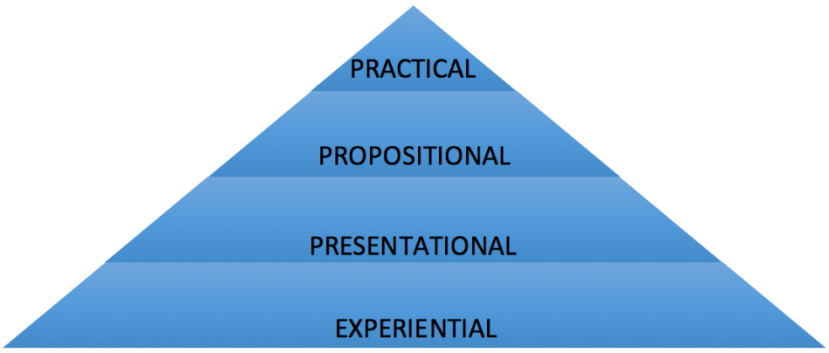


Figure 2: The Pyramid of Fourfold Knowing (Heron, 1996)

The analysis method used was the five-phased cycle of compiling, disassembling, reassembling, interpreting, and concluding advanced by Yin (2011). The justification for this choice of method concerns its non-linear nature and is owing to its reliance on a process that is recursive and iterative. Collaborative human inquiry, by nature of its

multiple research cycles unfolding over repeated stages of reflection and action, is amenable to this type of analysis technique. The data analysis process was implemented after each research cycle by me as the initiating researcher and at the start of subsequent regular meetings with the participants as co-inquirers. During the analysis phase, I first compiled our data sources together from each meeting, #1, #2 and #3, respectively, and analyzed them as follows.

For research action #1, during the reflection stage, the co-inquirers and I had listed and compiled all the commonalities in how we experienced or did not experience vulnerability in the cross-racial stories we shared. We organized these onto the fourfold model of knowing. After the meeting, I then disassembled them on my own into affinity categories, then reassembled them into eight themes. This revealed the commonalities in how we practiced/experienced vulnerability, while also revealing fears and mistrust, which addressed the research questions.

For research action #2, we did not have time to compile our responses to the sentence stems or prompts, collectively, so I compiled them on my own and organized them onto the fourfold model of knowing. I then disassembled them into smaller units/phrases, then reassembled them onto the eight existing themes, plus two new themes. This uncovered more of our deep rooted fears and mistrust, which addressed the research question.

For research action #3, the last research cycle, we compiled our personal examples of racist scenarios together. The group then chose to reassemble them into categories so we could see what they had in common, and how they were opportunities to draw out courage for vulnerability. This was the last meeting so we felt we needed to

address the last part of the research questions. Individually, after the meeting, I still wanted to do the same coding process as for the other two cycles. I compiled them and organized them onto the fourfold model, but they were all experiential knowledge. I disassembled them into smaller units/phrases, then reassembled them onto the ten existing themes, plus two additional themes.

Each set of data resulted from the action and reflection that transpired in that respective meeting. I shared these patterns with the group at the start of each subsequent meeting, as well as at the concluding meeting. Together, we interpreted the data and the participants as co-inquirers had the chance to disassemble or reassemble the data accordingly. During these meetings, we drew preliminary conclusions based on the data that then informed our final conclusions for the study in its entirety. The ability to connect with the data in these various ways increased the likelihood of uncovering authentic themes that addressed the potential of mutual vulnerability for interconnectedness in cross-racial relationships as the knowledge was co-constructed with participants, and consequently co-analyzed with the participants. The timeline for data collection (Appendix C) further describes these data analysis steps.

The intent was that the research outcomes, analyzed across these complementary four dimensions using the five-phased cycle, could contribute to the generation of a theory about mutual vulnerability in the context of cross-racial relationships, with implications for practice that could foster a more inclusive view of human interconnectedness. Using the four-stage model characteristic of co-operative inquiry, which I chose to incorporate into collaborative human inquiry, researcher and participants

worked together to recursively collect and analyze data as we moved from reflection to action and reflection.

Strategies for Validity, Credibility and Authenticity

Heron (1996) maintains that qualitative research is valid when the research outcomes are warranted and soundly grounded in the forms of participative knowing. He does however caution the researcher against "uncritical subjectivity" (p. 59) and recommends strategies to increase validity. Specific strategies from Heron that were employed in this study include research cycling, balancing reflection and action, managing distortions of thinking, perceiving, and acting, as well as continually assessing for authentic collaboration. Research cycling, or the multiple cycles of pre-reflection, action, immersion, and post-reflection, offers a natural feedback loop for participants to continually assess the knowledge constructed within and across each cycle. In doing so, any divergence from the four-form extended epistemological model was revealed and consequently addressed by me and the co-inquirers. As participants were immersed in the iterative action/reflection cycles, it was important to maintain a balance so that there was an appropriate amount of action and reflection informing each other. We committed to holding each other collectively accountable toward this goal. Managing distortions of thinking, perceiving, and acting was addressed by asking participants to assume the role of devil's advocate with other co-inquirers to ensure that there was congruence across the four multiple ways of knowing. Bray et al. (2000) contribute an additional strategy for managing distortions, which is to be aware of defensive routines (Argyris, 1990) within the group. Such behavior if not brought to awareness could hinder the group's ability to construct knowledge that reveals its true experience during the process, both individually

and collectively. Playing the role of devil's advocate was similarly useful in bringing awareness to the defensive routines. Using these validity checks assisted in surfacing and managing any resulting distortions or projections that would have remained hidden otherwise. The final strategy to check for validity was to continually assess for authentic collaboration among the participants and required that "each group member is fully and authentically engaged in each action phase and each reflection phase…is fully expressive, fully heard, and fully influential in decision-making" (Heron, 1996, p. 61). Framing the study methodologically as collaborative human inquiry assisted in this endeavor because participants worked toward fostering a genuine collaborative environment where each individual was encouraged to express themselves and did so in a manner illustrative of a non-hierarchical structure.

Eisner (1991) prefers the term credibility and advocates for structural corroboration in which the researcher strives for confidence about the conclusions made by *intentionally* looking for data that confirm or challenge interpretations. Similar to what Heron (1996) termed "unaware projections" (p. 60), Eisner (1991) underscores the importance of identifying evidence that is disconfirming and contradictory. By purposefully looking for what does not conform to the anticipated research outcomes, the researcher and participants, or co-inquirers, can adopt a critical position that guards against false assumptions during each phase of the research study. Inspired by Guba and Lincoln's (1981) caution to test for rigor, Bray et al. (2000) suggest asking the question "How do we know what we think we know?" (p. 104). As co-inquirers, we committed to asking this question as we collectively analyzed and interpreted our data. As opposed to merely anticipating or being aware of unconscious projections or distortions, this tactic

mandated a more active approach that was advantageous toward our efforts at validity and credibility.

With these precautions in place, any contribution to theory possibly emerging from the collaborative human inquiry process would have greater likelihood of being rooted in authenticity. Lincoln and Guba (1986) offer a useful set of criteria to gauge the authenticity of any drawn conclusions. Firstly, fairness refers to the participants having their voice heard in the absence of hierarchical power structures. Secondly, ontological authenticity relates to evidence of change in awareness and perception of the participants around the topic under study. Thirdly, educative authenticity indicates that participants have extended their knowledge of the topic to include alternative viewpoints around the topics. And finally, catalytic authenticity is action-based as participants undertake decisions or engage in behaviors that promote positive change. I employed this strategy as a culminating step in bringing the entirety of the inquiry process under examination. Whereas the previous strategies mentioned were employed throughout the inquiry process, this particular strategy served as a final step in bringing trust to the knowledge that was constructed and the outcomes that were ultimately achieved. Again, the outcomes and findings will be shared and interpreted for significance in chapters 5 and 6, respectively.

Possibility for Theory-Building

By way of its focus on participative knowing, co-operative and collaborative human inquiry carry the potential for individual and collective construction of knowledge in a highly democratic manner. Not only is there opportunity to come together as peers with equal ability to help explore the research topic, but there is possibility for the

knowledge constructed, subsequently and rigorously validated by an extended epistemological model, to contribute to existing theory. In other words, it is possible that what we discovered around mutual vulnerability will enhance our understanding of the related theories discussed in the literature review. For example, study outcomes reinforce the position that vulnerability is indeed a resource and an asset rather than a weakness, thus supporting the theory that vulnerability is an essential human condition (Brown, 2012). Increased feelings of human interconnectedness by the participants might add to the theories on social belonging (Hill, 2006) and social relationships (Barrett-Lennard, 2007). The resulting effect of vulnerability on interconnectedness in cross-racial relationships might amplify intergroup contact theory as described by Allport (1954) and Pettigrew (1998) as it pertains to its related need for accompanying self-awareness.

Such knowledge was grounded in experiential learning, which produced evidence in the form of presentational and propositional knowledge, toward the culmination of a new practice. Heron's (1996) view of such an extended epistemology is that it is conducive to potential theory-building owing to its transformative nature. "Transformative inquiries explore practice within some domain, changing the inquirers' behavior and the arena within which it is applied" (p. 92). As knowledge is gained at the experiential level and culminates into practical knowledge, the meaning that is co-constructed across the four ways of knowing contains relevant themes or patterns, which could inductively generate contributions to theory. This viewpoint is echoed in the work of Bray et al. (2000). "Collaborative inquiry as we practice it finds philosophical support from both pragmatism and phenomenology. It is a logical extension of humanistic psychology and provides a means for fostering transformative learning" (p. 6). In

considering these two philosophies, we can see a connection between conducting collaborative human inquiry and possible contributions to linking theory with practice. Outcomes resulting from the study could conceptually explain the phenomenon of mutual vulnerability via the lived experience of the racially and ethnically diverse participants and subsequently be translated into practice to evoke transformative change, such as increased feelings of human interconnectedness in cross-racial relationships.

Owing to research being conducted with the participants as opposed to being done to them, on them or for them, the presentational and propositional knowledge co-constructed from the participants acting as co-inquirers was neither filtered nor imposed by a researcher with their own agenda.

Limitations and Delimitations

Limitations

As with all research studies, there were limitations that I was unable to guard against since there indubitably arose conditions or events that I could not control. The limitation with the most impact on the study pertained to participant representation. Even though efforts were made during the sampling stage to recruit participants from a rich variety of races and ethnicities, I was not able to control for participants changing their minds about participating in the study. I had one participant who was not able to attend the orientation session and thus could not engage according to the timeline as established. More impactful due to the timing was the loss of a participant who signed the consent form and was enthusiastic about the study, but who had to withdraw immediately before the initiation session. The first recruit who could not participate would have brought an Indian perspective to the study, and the second recruit would have contributed a fully

Latinx voice to complement the participant who identifies as mixed Mexican and Middle Eastern. For those who remained committed, the process of scheduling meetings when all participants could attend was rewarded. I had full participation from all three participants at all meetings, which meant there were no integral voices missing from the group conversations or the one-on-one interviews. A lack of diverse voices at any stage of reflection or action would have impacted the research outcomes. A second limitation concerned the lack of time dedicated to the study. Each regular meeting was originally scheduled to encapsulate one full research cycle of pre-reflection, action and immersion, and post-reflection. However, due to the varied amount of time needed for each research action, each research cycle carried over into the subsequent meeting, which eventually shortened the time we had for the concluding meeting. A third limitation related to participant sharing of experiences. Even though participants signed an informed consent form to serve as fully immersed co-inquirers in a collaborative human inquiry that asks them to explore their vulnerability around a highly sensitive topic, I was never able to fully control nor make determinations about the authenticity of their contributions. We did however tend to the validity strategy of managing any distortions of thinking or perceiving by playing the role of devil's advocate with each other. But because this methodology rests on a dual stance of objectivity and subjectivity, it is important to admit this possibility. A final limitation concerned the capacity of the co-inquirers to successfully learn and adopt the special skills related to co-operative and collaborative human inquiry. To be sure, some seemed able to learn the skills better than others. Participants were asked during the semi-structured interviews about their ability to use the methodology and those findings will be shared in the following chapter.

Delimitations

There were certain methodological choices that I made which can be addressed here to bring light to what might be possible should the study be replicated. The first delimitation pertains to my choice to use females as participants in the study. Although this was a decision based on experiences that indicate women are more likely to be vulnerable within same gender spaces, which would be advantageous to the purpose of the study, it did limit the type of data that was collected since views are representative of a single gender in the cross-racial context. Another deliberate choice I made was to recruit participants who had attended multicultural or diversity training. This experience may have predisposed them to having a greater capacity to reflect and embrace the demands of the study. A final choice I made was to engage in a maximum of three research cycles, as opposed to the five or six recommended by Heron (1996). This decision was made by the circumstances which warranted that I conclude my dissertation within an established timeline that was both feasible and reasonable. I believe that the participants would have been willing to extend their commitment in order to continue the work, and for that I felt extremely gratified. I do not feel that we fell short of any goal because what we discovered in the end was incredibly revealing and more than satisfying. However, curiosity sometimes gets the better of us and wonderment about what might have transpired next was expressed by all.

Chapter Summary

Collaborative human inquiry, a hybrid version of co-operative inquiry and collaborative inquiry, was the methodology that was used for the study. Participants representing a diversity of races and ethnicities who were willing to be vulnerable and

who demonstrated capacity to engage as co-inquirers explored individual and collective experiences around vulnerability within cross-racial relationships. During our time together, appropriate attention was given to any cultural differences that may have arisen from the gathering of various ethnicities, as well as to the White voices which may have needed additional support for grappling with issues of privilege. Over multiple research cycles, with each cycle consisting of pre-reflection, action, immersion and post-reflection, data was collected as a large group and in one-on-one settings. Data was analyzed primarily by me between regular meetings, with opportunities for the group to interpret and make conclusions, using the four dimensions of knowing. Numerous strategies were employed to ensure validity, credibility and authenticity. The purpose of employing collaborative human inquiry for this study was to underscore the very human experience that the literature has revealed as inextricably linked to vulnerability, interconnectedness and cross-racial relationships. As a fully immersed researcher, co-subject, and facilitator committed to being vulnerable alongside the participants, I feel confident, despite any limitations or delimitations, that the resulting outcomes authentically highlight our individual and collective experiences in a way that showed the full humanity with which we engaged.

IV. COLLABORATIVE HUMAN INQUIRY

Throughout the study as well as upon conclusion of the study, the choice to use collaborative human inquiry proved to be well aligned with our research purpose. In this chapter, I seek to explain why the chosen methodology served our needs so well. I also aim to provide a list of components of collaborative human inquiry, based on our experiences, that were essential for us to engage authentically in the process that would justify our investment of time and energy.

Essentials of Collaborative Human Inquiry

Although Heron (1996) recommended that five to six cycles of research be implemented during co-operative inquiry, our study using collaborative human inquiry unfolded over three research cycles. I sensed that the participants would have liked to continue exploring beyond what we had time for, but we knew we had to work within the timeframe. Nonetheless, our brief adventure into a methodology that was new to all of us yielded an experience that exceeded our expectations. We felt successful with what we had achieved, and we know that any feeling of success employing collaborative human inquiry can be attributed to certain essential components: the willingness of the participants to extend themselves mentally and emotionally, the activities which helped build rapport and trust among the participants, the collectively generated norms that guided our interactions, the validity strategies which helped us remain focused and balanced, the nature of the actions in which we were immersed, and the desire to be vulnerable in what we shared in order to influence others toward change. Following is a description of the bold and courageous participants who engaged in the study. Each

portrait begins with a self-reported statement that captures our individual journey of vulnerability from initiation to conclusion of the study.

Co-Inquirer Portraits

Elsie

From unknown potential to unmasked collaborations. Meet Elsie. Born in the northeast and raised in the Midwest, Elsie is a White woman in her sixties who is dedicated to social and environmental justice. She both appreciates and boasts a penchant for creativity and innovation, and firmly believes that there is no place for hate in our world. She continually and aggressively seeks personal growth and is committed to action in her role as a White woman engaged in anti-racist work. Her experience with culturally responsive training is vast and she undauntedly possessed the motivation needed to engage in this study. Elsie entered the research process as a co-inquirer who is hyper aware of her position of power and her privilege. For her, the experience of participating in the study can be best summarized as follows: "intentional listening grows understanding which can lead to more impactful cross cultural collaboration."

Esme

From silence to action. Meet Esme. Although she identifies as a female of mixed Mexican and Middle Eastern race, her Palestinian culture did not play a significant role in her upbringing. It was Mexican culture that was much more prevalent and impactful in her life. The youngest of the participants in our group, 40-year old Esme was born in Houston, Texas and raised primarily in Austin, Texas. She also possessed the least amount of experience with cultural proficiency, having attended a few diversity workshops required by her employer. In spite of her limited background in work of this

nature, she was motivated to participate in this study because of specific cross-racial experiences. She therefore expressed an interest in the topic of vulnerability in a cross-racial context and was curious to explore more. When asked to summarize her experience as a participant in this study, Esme stated: "To be vulnerable is to be self-aware."

Janice

From curiosity to hunger. Meet Janice. Janice is a Black female, born and raised in Texas. At 47 years old, she has spent half her life working as an educator and attending diversity trainings for equally as long. Viewing this work as a lifelong journey, her familiarity with cultural proficiency is similarly extensive to that of Elsie. Janice staunchly adheres to her faith, which forms her core values, and consequently guides her beliefs and her actions. Her desire to learn from other ethnicities through dialogue that is uncensored but heartfelt was her motivation for participating. Her goal of learning and growing, and uncovering any blind spots, is indicative of her reflective disposition, which made her an excellent candidate for the study. Although she lacks confidence in society to evolve short of a spiritual awakening, Janice sees promise in engaging with this kind of work. That said, her summary of the experience as a co-inquirer should not be at all surprising: "If you believe that we are all created equally, why are we so unequal?"

Thymai

From naivete to conviction. Meet Thymai, initiating researcher and equally immersed co-inquirer alongside three phenomenal participants. For most of my life I have fluctuated between identifying as a Vietnamese and a Vietnamese-American female. It is more sensible to state the former since I was not born in the United States but in

Vietnam. But not including American in my identification seems to ignore a significant portion of my identity having been raised in America for 44 out of my 47 years. This state of confusion partially inspired my motivation to pursue this study because I was curious about how people navigate their ethnicity in a world that is increasingly becoming mixed, intertwined, blurred across racial lines. The other reason stems from a long held dream for peace and harmony among all peoples in spite of our differences. These reasons have been fortified over the years through my professional commitment to equity and inclusion work in the context of K-12 public education. In order to summarize my own experiences around this research study, I pose the following question: Will I remain as convicted standing alone, without my fellow co-inquirers next to me?

Setting the Stage

Creating the conditions necessary for the participants to explore their vulnerability in a cross-racial context required sufficient time for relationship-building and the establishment of trust within the group. In addition to the need to build such a rapport and foster a safe space, it was important to spend time generating the norms or agreements that would guide our interactions with one another. Bringing a multitude of ethnicities together meant that cultural worlds might collide as we engaged in the stages of the research cycle. Tending to both person-to-person interactions along with culture-to-culture interactions proved equally important.

Building Community

Prior to delving into the methodology and commencing the research stages, it was necessary to dedicate three hours in the initiation meeting to constructing relationships among the participants that would generate trust and build community. A variety of

activities were employed to this end. In an effort to provide consistent structures to our meetings, I began each gathering with a welcoming ritual and concluded with an optimistic closure. For the initiation meeting, I thought it was important to engage in two welcoming rituals of which the first was to complete the sentence, "On a perfect day, I…" Participants were given time to draft their response before sharing. After each participant shared, they were asked to make connections from the individual responses. Based on our responses and the commonalities that surfaced, we were able to co-construct a collective story including our group perception of a perfect day. Being in the outdoors and surrounded by family and people we love and who love us was a common denominator in how we described the perfect day.

The second welcoming ritual was for participants to create a pie chart of their life, with each segment of the pie representing an activity that constitutes a significant portion of their daily routine. See Appendix D for images of participant pie charts. Once again, participants were asked to notice connections in how we represented our daily routines as pie charts. Commonalities included gender preferences and lack of self-care. Both welcoming rituals allowed us to get to know each other better, and connect with each other on common ground, thus building a sense of community. Participants were finally asked to compare their perfect day description to their daily routine description and make comparisons. This was my attempt to engage them in an activity that required some self-reflection around our values and our actions, and acknowledgement of any discrepancies in between.

Other activities were introduced into the initiation session to further build and develop the relationships among the participants. They were asked to participate in a

quick draw activity where they were given a limited amount of time to sketch two items side by side on a large index card. On the left side of the card, they had to draw their favorite childhood memory. On the right side, they drew their favorite adult memory. After the time concluded, we regrouped ourselves into two pairs and gave ourselves additional time to share two memories with our partner. We took turns so that both partners had ample time to share while the other listened. Once this task was completed, we returned to a whole group setting to share our individual memories. However, this time the task was for each participant to share their partner's memories to the group. This activity required us to be actively engaged while listening with the intent of remembering, thus recognizing and validating what was shared by our fellow co-inquirer.

Prior to adjourning for the evening, participants engaged in one last activity which was to tell campfire stories. I used a campfire website on my laptop to create a warm and inviting environment. Participants were asked to think about a recent unexpected "aha" moment that gave them pause and which required them to deeply reflect on a previous practice or mindset. We then shared as a whole group as we sat around the campfire. In addition to these specific activities, we also spent time journaling and meditating together. The compilation of these varied activities along with the welcoming rituals aided our group of four in coming together, bound by a common purpose, and by a fondness for our new community and union. We asked the property manager of the Alma de Mujer Center for Social Change to take a group photo of us upon conclusion of this meeting and it still warms my heart to look at the photo and see the smiles that were created in just a single three-hour meeting.

Establishing Trust via Norms

It is not possible to engage in a collaborative endeavor without taking the time to decide on the norms that would guide how we interacted with each other. Furthermore, given the delicate nature of the study that laid before us, it was paramount that all voices were heard in the process of developing such norms and that consensus was obtained around those norms. To this end, I had participants engage in a process similar to developing a social contract within a classroom. Participants were asked to jot their thoughts on large chart paper, responding to three different questions. How do you want to be treated by me as the initiating researcher? How do you think I want to be treated by you as the co-inquirers? How do you want to be treated by each other as co-inquirers? Equal and quiet thinking time was allotted to brainstorm ideas for each of the questions, after which participants were permitted to discuss and agree on the thoughts that best captured how they wanted to interact with each other. Once a running list of the most salient items was generated, I introduced the Courageous Conversation agreements from Glenn Singleton (2014) to help inspire additional thoughts about other norms that may need to be included. A collaborative human contract that would govern our interactions with one another was born: In order to approach and sustain this experience of cross-racial vulnerability, we agree to stay engaged, speak our truth, experience discomfort, and expect and accept non-closure (Appendix E). Essentially, the participants unanimously decided to adopt the Courageous Conversation agreements. Each participant received a copy of our collaborative human contract to keep with their research materials, and we began each meeting by reading the statement out loud. Holding each other accountable to these norms was how we were able to establish trust over the course of the study.

Recognizing Cultural Worldview

With a total of four participants representing five different ethnicities coming together to engage in work that calls for a range of human sensibilities, it was important to tend to any varying cultural manifestations of vulnerability that might emerge during our time together. In order to shed light on this potentiality, I introduced the Courageous Conversation compass (Singleton, 2014) to participants. See Figure 3 below for a depiction of the compass.

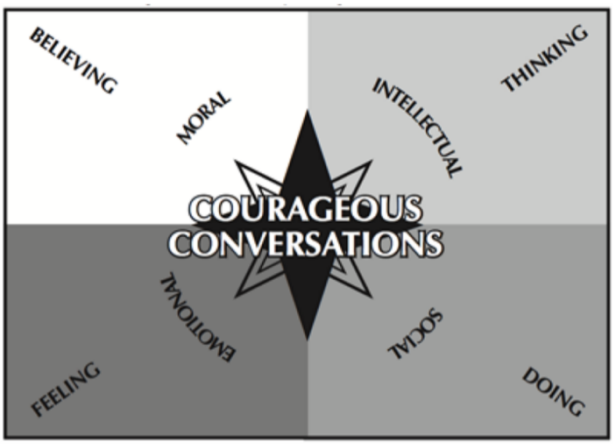


Figure 3: The Courageous Conversations Compass (Singleton, 2014)

Used to help people engage with issues of race, the compass acknowledges that people will react differently to information based on their worldviews about such issues. Each quadrant of the compass represents four dimensions: emotional, intellectual, moral and social. The participants were given a compass to keep with their research materials and were asked to have it available at all times during the research process. They were encouraged to refer to the compass when processing information, or when sharing information, to identify their state of being in relation to the action in which we just engaged. In other words, using their cultural lens, they were able to share whether they were feeling, thinking, believing, or doing in any given moment of the research cycles.

The use of the compass as a cultural anchor so to speak supported their varying vulnerable expression of emotions, beliefs and opinions within a context that was highly sensitive for all involved, regardless of our willingness and enthusiasm to pursue the study and demonstrate the necessary vulnerability.

Significance of Collaborative Human Inquiry

Collaborative human inquiry as our grounding methodology was well suited to the purpose of the study in terms of the validity strategies that it mandated. In order to acquire an understanding of how expressing and exploring vulnerability might influence our feelings of human interconnectedness within a cross-racial context, it made sense to focus on four strategies in particular. The strategies that formed an anchor for our investigative journey into the research topic and related questions were research cycling, balance of action and reflection, authentic collaboration, and managing distortions of thinking. We continually and even physically placed these strategies at the center of our work during each regular meeting.

Research Cycling

Research cycling occurred naturally as a result of our intent to engage with the study over the course of three different cycles of research, each containing a specific and agreed upon action that would help provide answers to the research questions. If we had the time, we would have liked to continue to one additional cycle beyond what we accomplished. We were however very satisfied with what we did achieve since the distinct cycles did offer us the opportunity to evaluate the outcomes of our first action, which informed how we approached our second action, which ultimately influenced what we chose for our third and final action. What we noticed was an evolution of the nature

of the actions in which we were immersed.

For example, although initially pleased with our first action, we later classified it as being too safe in terms of not sufficiently nor aggressively enough attacking the topic at hand. Still, we accepted that the first research cycle needed to create an initial foundation upon which we could build and thus needed to be more introductory in nature. We admitted that starting out, it did not feel safe to us at the time since it was our first attempt to enter the vulnerable space. As we moved into the post-reflection stage in considering the second action, we became braver in our efforts out of a vigorous desire for our time invested to result in something meaningful. We unanimously agreed that the subsequent action had to move us into a realm of discomfort, or else it would not culminate into raw and honest findings. Once we entered the final research cycle, our thought process changed to consider actions that would put our previous actions to the test. Otherwise stated, we wanted our last action to test that what we shared in the prior two actions was genuine. Doing so allowed us to methodically review the data collected using the fourfold way of knowing model and check for any lack of congruence from one action to the next. The iterative nature of research cycling not only adds to the validity of the study, but it enhanced our ability to be authentic in our participation. With relation to the purpose of the study, research cycling allowed us to amplify our readiness and willingness for expressing vulnerability as we transitioned from one action to the next. As the actions evolved in sophistication, we also evolved along with them. Specific details regarding the three actions will be provided in the next section of this chapter.

Balance of Action and Reflection

Heron (1996) cautions against an imbalance between reflection and action during

any cycle of research. It was important to pay attention to striking a balance between the two so that there was not too much action and not enough reflection, or too much reflection and not enough action. In order to tend to this particular strategy, the participants and I dedicated time at the beginning of each regular meeting to discuss how we were managing these two stages. Nobody in the group felt that we spent too much time reflecting and not enough time acting, or the converse. The recursive nature of the research cycle stages contributed to our ability to maintain this balance. With each action stage being sandwiched by a pre-reflection stage and a post-reflection stage, we felt confident that adequate time was given to each. This cyclical process of reflecting then acting, reflecting again and then acting again on two additional occasions, also made visible any inconsistencies in our progression toward answering the research questions. It allowed us to visualize a forward movement in our work that would have stalled had we noticed any distortions without addressing them. Using once more the fourfold way of knowing model as a referent, we could easily confirm that resulting data shared in the post-reflection stage, which would inform the following action, was grounded in our experiences from the prior action. This will be demonstrated in the next main section that follows where each regular meeting and research cycle is explicitly detailed.

Authentic Collaboration

Authentic collaboration pertains to the idea that each participant serving as the co-inquirer must fully participate, be actively engaged, and be heard throughout the research process. Additionally, each participant must also execute their capacity to make decisions regarding the direction of the study so that all voices are represented in the process. It can be said that with a total of four participants, it was not too difficult to

assess our ability to maintain this strategy throughout the study. This was the case indeed. In fact, prior to having been introduced formally as a validity strategy for our methodology, the participants and I had already informally committed to authentic collaboration during our time building relationships in the initiation meeting. This was cemented in the norms that we agreed upon where we each expressed our commitment to speak our truth and to stay engaged. Owing to the camaraderie and community that was developed, each co-inquirer was cognizant of their fellow co-inquirers and efforts were continually made to bring everyone into the dialogue as an active participant. A by-product of working in a small group of four was that a rotation naturally emerged in terms of how and when we shared. During the post-reflection stage specifically, when each participant shared their experiential knowledge resulting from the chosen action, turn-taking was the norm. In this manner, which was repeated for subsequent research stages and group conversations in general, it would have been impossible for a participant to not carry their weight and for that to go unnoticed. Considering the research topic of exploring our vulnerable experiences, and namely mutual vulnerability, authentic collaboration was not only a good fit for our study, but a necessity. Once a participant demonstrated vulnerability, it required reciprocity from other participants.

Managing Distortions of Thinking

This strategy was perceived to be inevitably the most challenging one to tend to as we moved from one research stage to the next. It would have been easy to get lost in the momentum of that forward movement aforementioned as we reflected and acted over three research cycles. Having the validity strategies posted around our physical meeting space provided good reminders for us to pause and discuss our progress adhering to the

strategies on a regular basis. But there was a phenomenon at play that I did not anticipate at the start of the study which allowed us to navigate this strategy with a degree of success. Each co-inquirer seemed undeniably committed to disrupting the status quo and had no interest in participating in a study that would not yield innovative results. They wanted to challenge themselves and to challenge each other as critical friends who were equally and thoroughly invested in work that sought to completely rupture cross-racial barriers. To this end, I found that we did our due diligence in not only being aware of any distortions in our thinking, perceiving and sharing, but that we examined our data to assess whether it contained enough rawness, grittiness. Only then did we feel that we accomplished what we hoped to achieve. In other words, we looked for data that did not conform to what we had seen up to any given moment, and we capitalized on it by allowing it to take us in a new direction. For example, during the second research meeting, a suggestion was made during the post-reflection stage, but it was challenged whether or not it was grounded in actual experience. "Was that grounded in the presentation, which was grounded in your experiences that you shared?"

Through an intense desire to be genuinely vulnerable and uncover any hidden perceptions or thoughts, we felt successful in managing such distortions. This strategy aligned well with the purpose of the study for the same reason that authentic collaboration did. When one participant was vulnerable, the other was expected and even felt compelled to be equally vulnerable, in the collaborative spirit of why we chose to come together. Any deviation from a sense of true authenticity and congruence in what we experienced, presented, proposed, or practiced on the part of any participant would have been called to question.

The Convening of Co-Inquirers

This section is intended to describe how the research process unfolded over the regular research meetings following the initiation meeting. Due to not having enough time over the course of the three regular meetings allotted for the cycles, it was necessary to carry the last research cycle into the concluding meeting. The original agendas for all meetings can be found in Appendix F, with needed adjustments highlighted in parentheses.

Aspiring into Action

For the first regularly scheduled research meeting, we met in the conference room of a local hotel, and our agenda began with a welcoming ritual in the form of sharing a magazine cover story, which highlighted our accomplishments. This was a homework assignment carried over from the initiation meeting due to shortness of time. Participants were tasked with creating a magazine cover that depicted what they deemed to be their greatest accomplishments. We had the option of creating one from paper or using an electronic template that was available via the website Canva.com. After each participant shared their story, as before during the initiation meeting welcoming rituals, they were asked to make connections from what everyone shared. Common themes were family and expressions of vulnerability by sharing from the heart. This was underscored by the common denominator that all participants considered accomplishments to be things that are not tangible. Nor are they items that one would typically list on a resume as accomplishments. In essence, community was strengthened within the group when noticing how they shared this common perception about accomplishments.

Time was then dedicated to reviewing the collaborative human contract that

contained our agreed upon norms for interactions, as well as a reminder to have the Courageous Conversation compass nearby so we could refer to it for processing of information through our individual personal and cultural lens. We then delved into the collaborative human inquiry methodology by reviewing its components (see Appendix G) via a scavenger hunt on paper. Next we looked at the Fourfold Way of Knowing model (see Appendix H) and engaged in an activity called Know, Need to Know. After reading a brief description of the model, participants listed what they know and what they still needed to know about the fourfold way of knowing. We discussed as a whole group before proceeding to the following activity.

Next on the agenda was the task of understanding the research topic. In order for participants to gain a better understanding about the study, I asked them to read two portions of the research proposal: the statement of the problem and the purpose of the study. After reading, participants were tasked with completing the four A's protocol based on the text. They wrote down their thoughts regarding the assumptions that were made in the text. They also listed what they could argue in the text, as well as what they could agree to within the text. Finally, they listed what they could aspire to according to what they read in the text. I asked each participant to facilitate the sharing of each round: assumptions, arguments, agreements, and aspirations. This allowed me to begin removing myself as the sole facilitator and allowed each co-inquirer to gain ownership in the research process. Once we shared our collective lists for each, I asked them to focus on the aspirations and connect them to our research topic of exploring the individual and collective experiences of mutual vulnerability toward deepening feelings of interconnectedness in cross-racial relationships. A brainstorm session emerged which

eventually culminated into the research question and related research sub-questions.

Now that participants had generated the research question and sub-questions based on their understanding of the topic under study, it was time to enter the first pre-reflection stage of the first research cycle by determining the first action. Participants were given a list of suggested activities that related to expressing vulnerability. After adequate time was provided to review the list or generate our own ideas, we worked together to come to a consensus around the first action. We decided to create a Venn story diagram that captured two different stories, with the intersection of the stories being represented by emotions or feelings at play. The story on the left of the diagram would describe a situation when it was difficult to be vulnerable across racial lines. The story on the right of the diagram was a description of a time when we demonstrated vulnerability across racial lines, and how others reacted to our vulnerability. We felt that these stories would uncover how we define what vulnerability looks like and feels like to us, within a cross-racial context. This action for our first research cycle was thus determined, and identified as a "group-based inside inquiry" (p. 43). Rather than the group remaining intact to engage in the action, the participants would engage in this activity individually. Furthermore, since there was not enough time during this first research meeting to enter into the action and immersion stage, the activity was assigned for homework. All participants committed to come to the next meeting ready to share and enter into those stages.

At the conclusion of the meeting, we engaged in a journaling activity to reflect where we were on the compass and to note it in our composition notebooks, or learning journals. As part of the optimistic closure, participants were tasked with sharing a six-

word memoir to describe how they felt about the evening, their experience during the meeting, or what they were hopeful about for the first research action. See Appendix I for the images of each participant's six-word memoir. Finally, we engaged in a six-minute guided meditation on the topic of compassion.

A Tale of Two Tells

For the second regularly scheduled research meeting, we decided to meet at my residence and have a potluck event during our time together. Because of the task at hand, sharing our story experiences from the first action, we hoped for a more inviting space in which participants could feel more relaxed. Each participant brought a food item to share and this helped to build an even stronger feeling of community among the group. For the welcoming ritual, participants were asked to share their empowerment song. The task was to locate a song on their mobile device that made us feel empowered. Each participant shared their song and played a little excerpt so that we could hear the words. Although my intent was to ask them to share any connections between what we shared and the reasons for which we chose our certain song, the conversation turned to a discussion of whether we focused on the music or the lyrics when hearing a song for the first time. This sharing of ourselves was evidence that participants felt comfortable with each other to disclose. Food and music were a wonderful combination to set the stage for our first research post-reflection stage!

Before beginning that stage, we reviewed our collaborative human contract and made accessible our believing/feeling/thinking/acting compass. We spent time reviewing the components of the methodology and participants had the opportunity to ask any questions about the collaborative human inquiry process. In order to review the four

validity strategies that we foreground for the study, we engaged in a mock snowball fight. Each participant received a crumpled piece of paper and we all simultaneously threw our ball of paper at each other and continued to do so until time was called. Once the time to play had concluded, each participant opened up the ball of paper in their hands and read the validity strategy noted on the paper. Each participant repeated this task with all the strategies…it worked out that there were as many of us as chosen validity strategies. Next, I invited the participants to move into my office, which I also call my zen-spiration room where we listened to a brief guided meditation on relaxation to help prepare ourselves for the intense work we knew was ahead. We posted the validity strategies around the room, and I brought their attention to the research topic and research questions which were also visibly posted in the space. Finally, we reviewed the first research action that we agreed to be immersed in prior to the current meeting, which helped orient us to the impending task.

The stage was now almost set for each of us to share our Venn story diagram. I distributed a template of the fourfold way of knowing and asked that each participant write down their thoughts onto the template after we listened to each other's stories. The goal was for the template to serve as a note-taking device to help us organize our thoughts and reactions to what we heard, or believed we heard. Since we were using the extended epistemological model as a template, it would also help us to think in terms of our experiential beliefs or knowledge, and how that might lead to presentational, propositional, or practical beliefs and knowledge. Now we were ready to enter the post-reflection stage following our first action. We each took turns sharing our two tales, which also were our two tells, because they revealed so much about where we stood in

our own personal journey with vulnerability in a cross-racial context. See Appendix J for images of these Venn story diagrams.

Esme. Esme's song of empowerment was "Pray" by Kesha. She first shared the story when she demonstrated vulnerability and how others reacted. While she is of mixed race, her husband is Caucasian. A situation occurred where he made a comment that she found offensive. He stated that if they ever had children, he would be able to educate them about Arab culture better than she would because of the books he had read on the subject. Despite not feeling connected to that part of her identity, Esme felt insulted. Sometimes for her it is not worth the battle to say anything in such situations, but she chose to be vulnerable and share her feelings with him. She thought it was a good opportunity to educate her husband. He felt mortified. Esme believed this was a chance for her to practice kindness and patience rather than resort to anger, and the situation was able to be resolved.

Esme's second story described when it was difficult to be vulnerable across racial lines. She had decided to go wine tasting by herself and encountered a large group at the vineyard, a Caucasian family. The bartender suggested that she join the large group since she was by herself. As she sat among the strangers, someone in the group asked her "What are you?" Her response was to reply that she was Hispanic, and not acknowledge her middle Eastern origins. Esme's reason for doing so was based on her feeling that something changes in other people's behavior when they discover that she is half Arab. She chose not to be forthright about her true ethnicity out of fear; it did not feel right to her to disclose that information to them. This was not the first time that she has been asked such a question. In fact, she has learned how to not let that question trigger her

because it just happens too much. She chose to not be vulnerable with them by telling them the truth. It is possible that they would have reacted differently than in other similar situations, but Esme was aware that she did not give them the chance to do so.

Esme shared the emotions and feelings that were found at the intersection of these two vignettes. In both her stories, she experienced the same feelings, but they were manifested in different ways. She was fearful and angry, with herself as much as with the situation. She felt uncomfortable, ashamed and disappointed in how she perceived her husband and the family at the vineyard. Even though she was surrounded by a loving husband, and a large group of people, she could not help still feeling lonely and excluded during those situations. Each participant was asked to complete the fourfold way of knowing template based on the experiences that Esme shared.

Thymai. Thymai's song of empowerment was "All the Way" by New Order. Instead of sharing the story in full sentences, I wrote in short phrases like in poetry, and I also color-coded words based on the feelings they elicited as I wrote them. My first story characterized when it was difficult to be vulnerable across racial lines. As I began to read my story, I started to get wrought with emotions and tears formed in my eyes. This story is about my interaction with a group of elderly White people at the start of the work day. They parked where they should not, I informed them, but was dismissed. Instead of being vulnerable, I became defensive, I pretended that I would report them. One lady asked if I had a problem, I did but could not verbalize it. They seemed not to care, so I parked in the garage to avoid them, after more similar encounters with the same group. I could not be vulnerable, I felt angry, incredulous, shaky, inferior, annoyed, and could not comprehend. Was it about race, or was it about entitlement? Or were the two the same?

I could not express what this was, but I knew I felt outnumbered. I could not be vulnerable because I was shaking too much and felt angry.

My second story characterized when I did demonstrate vulnerability and how others reacted. The situation took place at a Starbuck's on a busy Saturday morning. An elderly White lady asked to join my table even when there were other empty tables in the establishment. An elderly man came to speak with the older lady and she told him to join her. They took over my table and left me with very little space to do my schoolwork. I decided to move to the empty table beside me. The elderly lady decided to move my coffee cup toward me with her folded up newspaper, without a word to me. I was not able to focus, so I approached them and said I felt disrespected, belittled, and was not sure what their behavior meant. I made the decision to tell them how that made me feel, with hopes that they would never treat anyone else like that again. The elderly lady tried to apologize but it was not sincere; and the elderly gentleman, he told me to take that behavior somewhere else. Again, I questioned whether this was about race or entitlement, or both. I did not understand what had transpired, and felt confused, humiliated and sad. However, I also felt proud that I was able to tell them honestly how their behavior made me feel.

At the intersection of my emotions, were feelings of anger, incredulity, and a trembling sensation. I was not able to explain why in the second situation I was able to demonstrate vulnerability by taking the risk to express my feelings to these elderly strangers. I also could not explain why I was unable, or unwilling to be vulnerable, in the first situation. A common thought that rested on my mind regarding the two situations was my hesitancy to name these situations as racist, and instead lessening them in degree

of severity to a matter of entitlement. Each participant took a moment to complete the fourfold way of knowing template.

Janice. Janice's song of empowerment is "Not Lucky, I'm Loved" by Jonathan McReynolds. Janice showed the picture that she drew of a Venn Diagram with a Black girl and a White girl, positioned back to back as they are joined by and share the same hair. Janice chose to start with her feelings. She shared that in both stories, she felt the following emotions: isolated, judged, guarded, frustrated, angry, fear, doubtful, hopeful, exhausted, helpless, alone. Among this list of feelings, there was only one that was positive. She said that the word hopeful holds it all together for her.

Janice's first story read like a poem, and even included rhymes. We listened as she shared about when it was difficult to be vulnerable. Little would be done, but she had to make the effort, even though her voice is only one. Nodding heads, hollow words, kindest intentions. Racism. What has been brought to her attention is the response. She learned to watch what people do. She sat across the table with two administrators, to talk about a teacher and her child. She wanted to know about the gap between her child's effort and her outcome on an assessment. She was called an angry Black woman when she first addressed this with the teacher. As a result, she even made a point to be calm. She knew she had walked into the meeting already pissed off, tears not from sadness, but from being pissed off, trying to advocate for her child, but could not do anything.

For her second story, where she demonstrated vulnerability, she could not see it as a Black/White thing because it was not fruitful to do so. She learned to pick her battles. It was within a work context with a superior, laden with macro-aggressions without question. There was evidence that it was racism, and so she shared it was about race.

Even though she shared with her superior's superior, she decided to leave the job because she would rather quit than stay and watch nothing happen.

Janice made the conscious choice not to be vulnerable, and made the choice to be vulnerable, but both outcomes to these stories were the same. Everyone was given time again to write down their thoughts and reactions on the fourfold way of knowing template.

Elsie. Elsie's song of empowerment is "Imagine" by John Lennon. Elsie shared that she thought carefully about how to put the Venn story diagram together. She color-coded her two different experiences using blue and red. She knew there were positive feelings in those experiences somewhere. She intentionally included yellow for hope, because she continues to hold onto hope. Her first story involves a situation when it was difficult to be vulnerable across racial lines. A student was sent to her office when she was a school administrator for behavior problems. She knew his family, she knew that he was gifted, and very active. He was exhausted and angry when he came to her office. His teacher was upset because a Black boy was in her class and causing problems and she wanted Elsie to fix this. She felt that she could attempt to work on something, but this was such a larger thing happening, how would she handle this as a White woman in a position of power? She was vulnerable here in that moment, she felt like she was vulnerable, but it was difficult, she wanted to say to him so many things. This student had a history of blonde, White, teachers. She thought about how to approach this human being in a system that was broken, and to try to make this better. She did not know how he was feeling, not understanding his feelings, his challenges. She asked him if he was tired of dealing with White women. She was not sure if that was the right thing to say,

and he could not respond. She did not know if she was vulnerable enough to really talk about that concept with him.

Elsie's second story was when she joined two other women at a race and equity symposium and demonstrated vulnerability. There were three White women on the panel, and she needed to share her downfalls. When she steps in it, how does she step out of it? She cannot not share or else she remains in her White bubble.

In the first story, Elsie felt fear, rejection, stupidity, harm, and a sense of a setback. In the second story, she felt uncomfortable, fear, rejection, stupidity, and was desperately hoping that she was not doing harm. Lacing the two vignettes was fear, rejection, and stupidity. Everyone was given time to take notes on the fourfold way of knowing template based on the last participant sharing.

At this point in the post-reflection stage following the action, we embarked on a discussion about the thoughts, ideas or reactions we wrote on the note-taking template. It was an opportunity to notice any patterns in what we captured in our notes that surfaced from the storytelling of the two vignettes on being and not being vulnerable in the cross-racial space. Before we began, participants were given a short break to decompress after the intense sharing of our personal experiences. I prepared the room for the discussion by posting four large pieces of chart paper around the room, each representing one of the four dimensions of knowing. Esme volunteered to facilitate the four rounds of dialogue that would ensue, as well as be the scribe during this process.

During the discussion around experiential knowledge, participants shared commonalities they noticed. The following items surfaced in the discussion: entitlement, perception of others, assumptions, lack of empathy, self-awareness, conscious decision-

making, hope and optimism, learning moments, pride, disagreeable outcomes, unfortunate but realistic expectations, feeling diminished, proceeding with caution, learned helplessness, prior experiences, fear of not being White, and bravery.

We transitioned into presentational knowledge and repeated the same facilitation process. Participants were reminded that this knowledge must be grounded in our experiences of both living through those situations and the consequent sharing of those stories with each other. Ideas that emerged included: difficulty of eye contact, discomfort, fear of judgement or rejection, culture, concentration and focus, allowance for personal space, color-coding of feelings, strong emotions, negative emotions, and a rejection of self.

Our next task was to examine any propositional knowledge that underscored what we shared from both sets of stories and the emotions living at that intersection. Similarly, this knowledge had to be grounded in what we shared from our stories within the group space, which was itself grounded in our own personal lived experiences. Concepts that arose during this round of discussion included: naming racism, racial battle fatigue, power dynamics, insider/outsider perspective, White bubble, fear hinders vulnerability, and fear fuels vulnerability.

The final round of discussion centered on any practical knowledge that could be seen to originate from the propositional knowledge, which was inspired by the presentational knowledge, which was firmly grounded in our lived experiences of attempting or not attempting to be vulnerable across racial lines. The following practical knowledge patterns were identified: learning to take the risk in spite of fear, the risk outweighs the alternative, planting a seed for change, speaking up for self and others,

allowing others the opportunity to learn, challenging the system, willingness to move on and let go of something, making sacrifices based on principle, shining light on the issue, expecting and accepting non-closure, naming racism and call it what it is, and recognition of entitlement as part of a larger institutional racist construct.

These four rounds of rich discussion led to a collection of data that was analyzed and organized into themes. More details about the emergent themes for this action stage and all others will be provided in the chapter on findings. As participants were invited to look around the room at the data represented on the chart paper, they were also invited to take a long team breath. We noticed that it was already past the time that the meeting was scheduled to conclude. The participants however agreed to stay an additional thirty minutes so that we could end at a sensible stopping point. It was an interesting experience to see them fix their eyes intently on the ideas and patterns that stared back at them from the walls, seemingly speaking back to them their lived experiences around vulnerability.

Since we would not have time to enter directly into the pre-reflection stage to identify the next action, it was agreed that we would do so at the following meeting. Participants were given some logistical reminders prior to closing the meeting with an optimistic closure. Each participant had to share a playlist of songs that described the evening for them. Following are the songs that were shared, and declared as being descriptive of how they felt upon conclusion of our first research action stage: "Against All Odds" by Phil Collins, "No More Words" by Berlin, "Nothing's Gonna Stop Us Now" by Starship, "Intentional" by Travis Greene, "No Time to Waste" by Hezekiah Walker, "Pressure" by Jonathan McReynolds, "Believe" by Cher, "Respect" by Aretha

Franklin, and "Girls Just Wanna Have Fun" by Cyndi Lauper.

Finishing our own Sentences

For the third regularly scheduled research meeting, we met at a neutral space in a house in downtown Austin that rents out their conference rooms. This house was called the Sunflower House and it was the perfect space for our group as we sought to transition from one research cycle to another. For the welcoming ritual, participants were asked to complete the sentence, "I am curious about…" After each co-inquirer shared their sentence, we discussed the commonalities and noticed that we each wanted to know the next step. We were curious about whether there would be any forward momentum from the study, about the outcomes of the study, and about our own commitment to being vulnerable in cross-racial contexts after the study had concluded. It was gratifying to see that we were all thinking about what would happen once the study ended, and what that would mean for us as a group and as individuals. The desire to know of any potential next steps communicated to me that perhaps participation in the study had transformed them in some way that they wanted to know more, to do more.

We continued into the meeting by following the same protocol of reviewing the collaborative human contract and locating our Courageous Conversations compass. We then reviewed the fourfold way of knowing model and the validity strategies. Intentional discussion followed about how well we were doing in adhering to those four strategies. We also decided to begin our meeting with a guided meditation that fostered the release of serotonin to help us stay relaxed.

It was now time to continue the post-reflection stage following our first action of having shared dual, but contrasting stories describing situations when we were vulnerable

across racial lines, and when it was difficult for us to be vulnerable across racial lines. Prior to this meeting, I had analyzed the data we collected from the sharing of those stories using the five-phased cycle of compiling, disassembling, reassembling, interpreting, and concluding advanced by Yin (2011). I took the ideas that had surfaced and copied each phrase from their fourfold knowing chart paper onto individual post it notes and looked at them in totality to understand what they communicated. I then looked at each idea separately and disassembled them into smaller one to two-word units. Next, I reassembled the smaller unit ideas using an affinity grouping process to organize them into themes. There were eight themes that emerged: risk-taking toward action, vulnerability, awareness of self, interactions with others, institutional racism, White entitlement, prior experiences, and storytelling. These eight themes fell into dyads that corresponded to the four dimensions of knowing. Risk-taking toward action and vulnerability described our experiential knowledge. Awareness of self and interactions with others pertained to our presentational knowledge. Institutional racism and White entitlement corresponded to propositional knowledge. Prior experiences and storytelling were associated with practical knowledge and the potential to change our narratives by transforming those past experiences around how we expressed our vulnerability with others across the racial divide. I shared these dyads of themes with the participants so they could have an opportunity to analyze them as well and make any preliminary conclusions. They were all in agreement with the themes as organized and did not have any preferences for disassembling or reassembling the data. I found this surprising but wondered if this was due to their lack of familiarity with analyzing data. I do not consider myself well-versed in this process either, but suspected that since I was the initiating

researcher, they respected my analysis. It would not be until the next action stage and subsequent analysis that I realized that they definitely would have expressed any disagreement with the resulting themes had they seen the need to do so.

We spent time considering this data and referring back to our research questions to see how well we had addressed them in our preliminary findings. I then provided time for each of us to journal and to write down ideas for a second action. I encouraged them to think about what we had discovered so far and what we still might need to do to get closer to the research question and sub-questions. The consensus was evident. Each participant stated the need to dig deeper, to go beyond surface level of expressing vulnerability and get to the real issue at hand. In other words, we felt that our next action had to require us to go be edgy, to not leave the hard stuff untouched, to discuss our own shortfalls by looking at our shortcomings, to reveal our own fears, our real thoughts, and how they play out in a cross-racial context. As a result, we brainstormed together as a group and drafted sentence stems that we felt would more deliberately target the research questions. We continued in this pre-reflection stage by discussing how to approach this next action. Each participant was assigned certain sentence stems to write on a separate sheet of paper. We decided to engage in a circling format as we responded to and completed the sentences. A suggestion was made to organize the sentence stems from more safe to more vulnerable, from least intense to more intense. A header statement was then placed at the very top of the sentence stems that read "When I am vulnerable across racial lines…" See Appendix K for the sentence stems. A question was posed about how to incorporate a space to process and reflect after responding to each prompt. We decided to identify where we were positioned on the compass after each response in

order to help us process, and share, our state of vulnerability as we were immersed in the action. In order to do this, our plan for the action stage was to rotate turns with each round of sentence stems by responding verbally, and then processing physically by moving to a corner in the room labeled believing, thinking, feeling or acting. After the group was given a short break, we immersed ourselves in the second action stage. As we moved from one sentence stem to the next, each co-inquirer reacted and responded authentically and their degree of vulnerability seemed to be reciprocated by the participant who responded next. The cycle of completing the sentence stem and moving to the corner of the room indicating our position on the compass then returning to our seat was repeated eleven times. There were ten original prompts, but we duplicated the first stem, "I'm committed to…" so that we had to answer it at the start and the end of the action stage. We felt this might give us some interesting data that might shed light on how vulnerable we became over the course of a single action. See Appendix L for the summary results of this action.

After the stage concluded, we took the initiative to pause to give each other an encouraging and validating hug, to thank each other for our show of vulnerability. It became apparent to me in this moment how invested we were in getting to the heart of what we set out to do with this study. Informally, we began our post-reflection stage for this action and a co-inquirer presented a concern that two of the prompts were still too safe and did not require us to be as vulnerable as the other sentences had. We agreed that during the next meeting we would address those two questions and re-respond to them. This was a good example of heeding our validity strategy of managing distortions of thinking. Rather than accept that she had not felt sufficiently challenged when answering

two of the prompts and remained silent, this co-inquirer activated her developing inquiry skills by playing devil's advocate and requiring that we revisit those two prompts that were not well written. At this point, it was necessary for me to invite the participants to take a couple of team breaths with me to decompress and bring some lightness back into the space.

Once again, we thought about what we had shared during this second action and referred back to our research question and sub-questions. Now that we had expressed our deepest fears and emotions when it comes to being vulnerable across racial lines, it was clear that we needed an action that would link to the idea of mutual vulnerability. In other words, we saw the need to uncover how to elicit reciprocity of vulnerability in cross-racial contexts. A suggestion was made to examine situations we have either experienced or witnessed where some sort of moral dilemma or assumption was made due to race. Thus, for the third action, we decided that we would individually make a list of these real scenarios to share at the next meeting in order to collectively engage in discussion about how mutual vulnerability could transform them. Each participant was tasked with bringing five scenarios to share during our last meeting. Since the next meeting was scheduled to be the concluding meeting, we knew that we had to stay on track in order to complete the three full research cycles.

For the optimistic closure, participants were asked to do a Glows and Grows activity, which meant that each had to share one thing they wanted to celebrate about our time together tonight, and one thing that could be improved for our time together during the last meeting. What is interesting about the commonality in what we shared as part of this activity was that although we celebrated our courage in engaging with the second

action, we each expressed a need to be better, to push ourselves to be more honest, even more raw and more intentional.

Hidden in Plain Sight

The regularly scheduled concluding meeting had to be restructured so that we could complete the third research cycle prior to examining all the data over the course of the study and make final conclusions. We met at the Asian American Resource Center, part of Austin Parks and Recreation facilities and convened in a large conference room where I was able to post all the work we had achieved from start to current date. As the participants arrived, they were immediately immersed by the intense work we had been involved in over the past five months. For this last meeting, we did not do a welcoming ritual because by this time the participants had bonded in such a way that it felt perfectly natural to arrive and begin catching each other up on personal life events. Rather than a group of co-inquirers convening together to complete a study, it was a gathering of people coming together because they enjoyed being together. As was usual practice, we reviewed our collaborative human contract, made sure our compass was accessible, reviewed the fourfold way of knowing model, and discussed the validity strategies.

As agreed upon from the previous meeting, we reexamined the two sentence stems from the second action and rewrote them to be more personal, requiring us to more deeply look inward at our own selves. For example, the original stem written as "When I'm vulnerable across racial lines, what or who frightens me is…" became "When I'm vulnerable across racial lines, who frightens me is…" The other example is the stem initially written as "When I'm vulnerable across racial lines, Whiteness is so desperately defended because…" changed to "When I'm vulnerable across racial lines, Whiteness is

so desperately defended because I…" Time was given for each to respond to two revised prompts and to process where we were on the compass.

At this point, we needed to continue our post-reflection stage following the second action of having completed the sentence stems. I had created a document where I typed up each of the eleven prompts and included all of the participant responses along with our compass positions. Each participant was given a copy to review so we could reflect answering the following questions: How did your initial and final responses compare regarding what you would be committed to when being vulnerable across racial lines? How can you explain the evolution of that commitment? Collectively, the responses became more clear and specific, requiring us to focus on ourselves and take more action. Which quadrant of the compass was primarily represented in our responses? For Janice and Esme, their states of vulnerability were evenly distributed across the four quadrants of believing, thinking, feeling, and acting. For Elsie and me, we seemed to live in the three quadrants with very little representation in the acting quadrant. Individually, we each needed to pause and reflect on what our responses communicated to us about our experiences being vulnerable across racial lines. It was agreed that we needed to immerse ourselves in this second action to truly peel away the layers of political correctness and express wholeheartedly our fears and feelings of mistrust. This definitely helped us arrive closer to answering the research question and sub-questions.

As with the previous research cycle, I conducted an analysis of the data collected from the sentence stem responses prior to the meeting. Using once again Yin's (2011) five-phased cycle of analysis, I extracted each response from their associated sentence stem and compiled them together to look at them in totality. I then disassembled them by

shortening them into smaller units with less words. My next step was to see if I could reassemble them into the existing eight themes that emerged from the first action stage analysis. I was able to do so easily, but not without two new themes coming to the surface, inferiority/inadequacy and empathic attunement, which also constituted their own dyad. However, when I attempted to place this dyad into one of the four dimensions of knowing, it occurred to me that this one in particular underscored all four types of experiential, presentation, propositional, and practical. I presented these updated set of theme dyads to my co-inquirers on large chart paper posted around the room. Since we had revised our two sentence stems, I walked them through the process of how to analyze their two new responses and then post them on the chart paper according to their interpretation. They also had to locate their original responses and remove them before replacing them with the new responses. We had a good discussion about how changing the sentence stem also shifted their data from one theme to another.

Since we were aware that this was our last meeting together, it was decided that before engaging in the post-reflection stage for the third action, it would be a good idea to review what we had accomplished thus far. We did a gallery walk around the room to remind ourselves of the steps we had each taken to get to this point in time. We looked at our research topic, and the information we co-constructed during the four A's protocol that helped us generate our research question and sub-questions. We were reminded of our first action of sharing the two stories of being and not being vulnerable and the feelings that arose in both situations. We glanced at our post-reflection brainstorming notes, which conveyed a commitment and a need to dig deeper. We briefly looked at the sentence stem summary of all our collective responses. Finally, we stared at the ten

themes that had emerged as a result of the two research cycles and a pattern revealed itself in the form of a possible theory of action.

If we are to be vulnerable and engage in risk-taking action, we need more self-awareness, which would improve our interactions with others; if we deal with our own feelings of inferiority and inadequacy, we might increase our empathic attunement with others; then, we might be able to make a dent in White entitlement and perhaps even in institutional racism, and therefore consequently change our storytelling experiences and narratives going forward. Doing this would help us to understand our fears and feelings of mistrust when interacting with cross-racial or cross-ethnic others and increase our feelings of human interconnectedness with them. There was an electricity that seemed to fill the room as we each experienced a sensation of the possibility of what we may have uncovered. As the sensation settled somewhat, we knew we had to ask ourselves the ultimate question, "How do we know what we think we know" and "Is this really a possible conclusion?" We also knew we had one more action we need to reflect upon as part of the third research cycle.

It made sense to open up the floor to thoughts and reflection and to give this post-reflection stage the time it deserved before moving on to the next action. A rich discussion began around the concept of empathic attunement, and it being a lofty ideal that we were not sure could be achieved simply by being vulnerable and examining our feelings of inadequacy. We may be able to feel more interconnected to another across the racial divide, but is that the same as being empathically attuned to another? As we delved into this topic, two things were revealed. First, we realized that in order to feel humanly connected to or empathically attuned with another who is racially or ethnically

different, there has to be reciprocity in the vulnerability that is expressed during those interactions. Second, the mutual vulnerability can only exist if both parties during those interactions possesses a level of self-awareness about their own fears and mistrust. Jokingly, a co-inquirer suggested that we commit to more research cycles and another five months. Another co-inquirer asked "How do we get there? How do we ask someone to put on their own critical lens?" The discussion that ensued seemed to force us to pivot and look at our next action stage in a new way.

Elsie: Maybe that is why we are still sitting where we are.

Janice: When this has played out for me; when I have had to be vulnerable, I have to take risks often, I'm hyper-aware for self-preservation; but the other person has the option not to reciprocate that vulnerability; I respond to their reaction; I can do all I can, but if they do not reciprocate, I cannot make that end goal, the narrative cannot be changed.

Esme: We have to engage in that action.

Thymai: Maybe we cannot get to empathic attunement now; maybe it is just improving our interactions.

I suggested that we refer back to the research question and consider how can we draw out the courage from others to be vulnerable. We decided that it would be a first step to look at the racist scenarios we each provided as part of the last action. Maybe, in examining these certain scenarios, we create a tool to help with the needed self-awareness. Could we suggest ways for how people could respond in these scenarios based on our emerging theory of action?

After each participant shared their list of scenarios of cross-racial interactions

with hidden in plain sight racist assumptions, see Appendix M, we had no choice but to analyze them together in order to conclude the study in our last meeting. Our goal was to explore how introducing mutual vulnerability into these cross-racial interactions could transform them. Our first task was to compile them together so we could look at them in totality. We then disassembled them by assessing them as smaller units of ideas and wrote these on chart paper. Once we could see the concrete ideas that were embedded into each scenario, we were able to reassemble them into categories such as visual images and media, (TV, movies, radio), institutions (education, airport, clinic/medical, sports, banking), retail, grocery, and individual, human to human, one-on-one people interactions. As we attempted to interpret these data, a suggestion was made that we could then organize these categories into levels of society with institutions such as banking and educational systems representing the macro level, medical or retail communities constituting the meso level, and the individual relationships making up the micro level. Finally, our last step was to see how these data could be placed into our ten existing themes and layered onto the fourfold way of knowing. Even though these new data were co-constructed based on our experiences of what we had been through or seen that was racist, hidden or not, it appeared that we went in a different direction with the last action. In other words, this action was not focused on revealing our own experiences around vulnerability, but rather to explore how we could encourage experiences of vulnerability in others based on what we had experienced together, individually and collectively.

We wanted to use our experience from what we had learned by engaging in this study to create some kind of social change so that mutual vulnerability could transform

all our behaviors and thus help us feel more deeply connected with others of different races and ethnicities. Therefore, rather than place these categories into our themes, we saw these levels of society as being sites for potential change within which our proposed theory of action, resulting from our themes, could indeed move from theory to action. Similarly, rather than locate these categories onto the fourfold way of knowing model, we saw these particular data being characteristic of the practical dimension of knowledge. True to the model however, we were only able to arrive at this conclusion because of the other three ways of knowing. The experiences we had of being vulnerable in presenting our personal stories around being vulnerable in cross-racial contexts, led to gaining propositional knowledge around the research topic, which eventually led to practical knowledge about what we needed to do to be better ourselves, and how we could leverage the totality of our experiences to encourage a reciprocity of vulnerability in others. Just as we had to uncover our own self-awareness throughout the research process, we knew this was the key ingredient. We each have to be in a place where we are ready to acknowledge our own behavior before we can arrive at a place of mutual vulnerability and human interconnectedness with racially or ethnically different others.

For the last meeting, optimistic closure, each participant was simply asked to share their final thoughts on the research process and study experience as co-inquirers.

> Esme: This has been (a) huge honor, enlightening, helped me be more the person I want to be.
>
> Janice: This exceeded anything I thought it would be, learned a lot about me, was skeptical, given me the ability to trust, need to stop seeing White people as a collective, but as individuals.

Elsie: I am honored to be here, feel lucky to be a part of co-creating a better world, helpful to dig in with others.

Thymai: This is my life's work, never knew my life would end up in this work, very grateful, don't want this to be an end to us.

The Experience of Being Vulnerable

Our research topic for this study was the individual and collective experiences of mutual vulnerability toward deepening feelings of interconnectedness in cross-racial relationships. Our research question challenged us to discover how we can use vulnerability to explore our deep-rooted fears and mistrust in a way that draws out courage for the reciprocity of that vulnerability. In order to answer this, we believed it was necessary to also answer the following sub-questions: What are those fears? What are commonalities in how we practice vulnerability? How can these commonalities help us move beyond our fears and increase our feelings of interconnectedness in cross-racial contexts? During the recruitment process, it was important that I asked each interested participant whether they were willing to express and explore their vulnerability while interacting with racially and ethnically diverse others. Those who said "yes" and signed the commitment forms embarked on a journey, of which I was a fully immersed participant with them and that helped us to look inward at ourselves in a very intense way. Below are how the individual and collective experiences of vulnerability were manifested throughout our collaborative human inquiry adventure. Because of the extended epistemological model of fourfold knowing which foregrounds the importance of co-constructing knowledge based on experiential, presentational, propositional, and practical knowledge, those experiences were also inevitably transformative.

Individual Experiences

As part of the data collection, participants were expected to commit to two semi-structured interviews during the study. Each 20-30 minute interview took place after the first regular research meeting and the third regular research meeting. This was intentionally spaced out over the five months to allow the participants a time and space to check in with me as the initiating researcher in a one-on-one format near the early stage of research and toward the end stage of the research process. There were five guided questions that were asked of each participant and probing questions were employed as needed to elicit elaboration. See Appendix N for a list of the interview questions.

Elsie. Elsie identifies as a White woman. For her, participating in the study provided her with an opportunity to connect with strong, powerful women, and to be real. She enjoyed the experience of working on herself in response to working with others, and found it to be personally valuable as a source of growth. She is a highly collaborative individual and finds meaning in engaging with others. However, as a White woman coming into a cross-racial space, she does experience some anxiety around not wanting to offend anyone. Even if the space that has been created feels safe to her, this is a concern because it can easily happen. "I do feel a higher level of accountability than others in the group, I am well aware of how society is set up, there is a differential, it is not equitable. I have privilege on a regular basis, I try not to take it personally but I am a person."

With regards to expressing and exploring her vulnerability with others across this racial divide, Elsie felt that all co-inquirers were willing partners and did not feel that anyone held back. She also did not feel any hesitation on her part even though the potential of what might be revealed was scary. She saw the value in what we wanted to

do as it relates to the study's purpose and felt good being in the same space with like-minded others. She did work hard at vulnerability, but was aware that she began the journey with the intention of peeling back some layers. A particularly interesting insight for Elsie was the level of raw emotion she witnessed from other participants. Being in a group where a lot of strong opinions and thoughts were voiced made her feel stronger. This was also partly owing to the methodology which she appreciated as a framework or protocol for giving her structure and direction so she did not feel lost. She described it as being loose-tight, with structure but with a space dedicated to humanness. There was one moment in the early stage of the process where she admitted to feeling more anxiety from one participant in the group in particular. But by the end of the process, this was no longer the case. Else did state she knew this is her role; to hold herself more accountable. Even if it makes her feel somewhat sad, she knows she cannot blame the other person.

Esme. Esme identifies as a mixed-race female of Mexican and Middle Eastern origins. The experience overall for her was enlightening. She found it enjoyable to spend time with other women and do something that had not been done before. "On a normal day, I don't sit around and think about my vulnerability, or how I present myself to people that I want to open up to me." For her, hearing the perspectives of a White woman was insightful because people have no way to know what individuals go through unless we talk about our experiences. Her enjoyment stemmed from hearing about such experiences, those that were different from her own. It helped to bring our group to a better understanding of ourselves and be excited knowing that doors will open up for how to observe things. She felt that she had learned something new with each meeting and felt a sense of endless possibility.

For Esme, vulnerability is not something she typically does, especially when it pertains to expressing vulnerability around her race or ethnicity, upbringing or culture. Growing up, there were many things she could not talk about, and knows it is not easy to talk about uncomfortable topics. But in expressing her vulnerability with her co-inquirers, she found commonalities and discovered that those who are different from her, are not different at all. It was valuable to her to explore how she had felt wronged and to see how others have experienced similar wrongs. Since the space created was such a safe environment, the experience felt very collaborative, and she knew they would continue to build trust with each other. "As scary as it is to be vulnerable, I don't feel it will be difficult with these women that I respect already." By the end of the study, Esme spoke about the connection that arose within the group because we had all done our part to dig deep, to not hold back, but to contribute to everyone being heard and felt. She complimented the methodology and the guidelines it provided, which made her feel comfortable and not alone. She understood it was a process and was eager and curious every step of the way to tell her stories while listening to others. She knew that if she wanted others to open up to her, she would have to reciprocate.

Janice. Janice identifies as a Black female. Initially, she felt the experience to be intriguing because she was not sure what to expect. She knew she was glad to be a part of a dialogue with different races and ethnicities because her experience had always revolved around the Black and White divide. Early in this journey, immediately at the conclusion of our first research meeting, an incident took place that we all knew was racially biased. Janice expressed feeling supported by her co-inquirers during this situation and this was something she had not experienced before. The overall journey

was something that she looked forward to and which exceeded her expectations. "I appreciate the process itself, each of our voices is genuinely incorporated. It's been different and powerful in the room with four different races, ethnicities. Typically, there is a dominant voice, and I felt that everyone was heard."

When it came to expressing her vulnerability, Janice found humor in how the group chose to go deep with the work. This allowed her to not feel like she never had to hold back her own thoughts and feelings. For Janice, she always felt that if she spoke, what she said needed to be of value. With this group of co-inquirers, she found herself sharing openly and freely. This was evidence that she was truly activating that vulnerable side of her. Normally, this kind of work makes her feel exhausted and even traumatized. The collaborative human inquiry process gave her the space to be her own self, to authentically share without trying to appease anyone. The experience of being in a room with a White person who genuinely seemed to want to do this work was a source of enlightenment for her. It helped her to realize that White people struggle with the words to verbalize their feelings, and she finally understood this. Throughout the study, there was a natural flow of sharing so that she did not feel like she was participating in a study but rather having conversations with others seeking truths for each other. For Janice, she especially liked that the process continually evolved into more in-depth sharing and more vulnerable actions.

Thymai. I identify as a Vietnamese or Vietnamese-American female. As the initiating researcher, I did not interview myself but am able to share my own experiences as a fully immersed participant in the study. Similar to what the other participants shared, I also felt the experience was immensely valuable to me because I had always

been curious to see what would happen if individuals from different races or ethnicities came together to examine their thoughts and feelings through expressions of vulnerability. However, I knew that being the initiating researcher did not equate with me being the one to teach others about the process of doing so. I deeply desired to learn from their experiences and knew that collaborative human inquiry was the best way to create an environment where we were co-constructing meaning together.

The ways in which I expressed my vulnerability were surprising to me. I always considered myself to be an open book and usually provided more information than I held it back. But when I think about the first action and how emotional I became when sharing my stories of when I was and could not be vulnerable, I never felt so exposed before in my life. Still, it was not an uncomfortable feeling because I felt supported by the women in our group. I am so proud of how little time it took for the other three co-inquirers to bond with each and develop trust for each other. Although they may have said it was because I created those conditions, I know it is the methodology itself that created those opportunities for authentic collaboration to occur. As we moved from one research cycle to the next, my ability to stay engaged at a highly vulnerable level was influenced by my co-inquirers who never showed any hesitation in doing so. What we saw was the opposite. Not only did they not hesitate to go deeper with their thoughts and feelings, but they chose to take it to a level at which they admitted fear and discomfort. When you see this courage in the people you have chosen to participate, there is no choice for me but to reciprocate. I think it is safe to say that each co-inquirer experienced this need to reciprocate in order to adhere to the norms we generated and to uphold the commitment we each made to the study from the outset.

Collective Experiences

In terms of how we experienced vulnerability as a group using collaborative human inquiry, it is useful to refer back to the three strands that Heron (1996) brings to our attention: the inquiry strand, the collaboration strand, and the emotional and interpersonal strand.

The inquiry strand pertains to the initiating researcher's ability to help the participants understand the method of inquiry well enough to be able to participate. The co-inquirers each expressed that their comfort level in being vulnerable was influenced by the structure that the methodology provided. They appreciated having a framework that guided them from one research cycle to the next, and even within each research cycle. The stages of the research cycle also provided a protocol that helped them navigate the process, while at the same time allowing for them to authentically engage and contribute without feeling constricted to follow that protocol to the letter. Esme stated: "I am not uncomfortable, I like the order to how we are approaching these things; it is free flowing, but we do have guidelines. That is helpful, makes me feel more comfortable." Even with guidelines, the inquiry strand permitted a certain level of flexibility in its focus on human sensibilities. There were a variety of ways that co-inquirers were able to share and this freedom increased their ability to remain vulnerable in the spaces created. Their learning and understanding of the methodology also increased with each research cycle and they were each very willing to ask questions when they did not understand. This is part and parcel of being vulnerable too, admitting when you do not know something.

The collaborative strand ensures that each participant contributes to the decision-

making process and that authentic collaboration is achieved. Each co-inquirer committed to the study knowing that it would be a highly collaborative endeavor. The key to making certain that the study sustained its collaborative component was what we accomplished during the three-hour initiation meeting. It may seem like a generous amount of time to dedicate to relationship-building activities, but it was essential to make the time to build that community among the participants. Generating the norms together where everyone's voice was heard was paramount because it made each participant feel empowered to engage as their authentic self and not merely say what they thought others would want to hear. Since they were being asked to be vulnerable in highly sensitive and delicate circumstances, the feeling that they could share freely and be supported was paramount. Janice shared: "We all want to be there, consciously we want to grow, no concerns at all, norms established have helped to build trust."

The last strand fosters a spirit of awareness of the challenges that will arise from participating in the inquiry such as stress or tensions. I think our success in navigating this strand is owing to the fact that we each had been exposed to some type of cultural proficiency training in the past, albeit some with much more experience than others. This prior exposure to multicultural or diversity training is stated as a delimitation within the study to bring awareness to how a lack of such training or readiness might change the outcomes of the study. Nonetheless, I think it is safe to say that we each welcomed the challenge because we knew that was the only way we would grow personally but also the only way to bring meaning to the study beyond a superficial level. Each time we decided upon an action, there was this overwhelming sense that we were going into unknown lands and uncharted territory. This naturally brought about some trepidation among the

participants. Despite this, we acknowledged that we felt apprehensive, but we moved forward knowing that we would support each other. Elsie stated: "One of the points of being a cross-racial group is to work on things like this. As a White person seeing a micro-aggression toward someone of color, I would like to grapple with that." This is a kind of honesty and openness that was rare, and it worked because we each committed to being vulnerable with ourselves and with each other. We already bought in to the idea of mutual vulnerability being instrumental to achieving any answers for the research questions.

Transformative Experiences

Heron (1996) refers to a "transformation of personhood" (p. 38) as part of engaging in cooperative inquiry, whereby we grow personally as we develop both our interpersonal and intrapersonal skills. Whether concerning our cross-racial relationships with each other, or with those outside of the inquiry, none of the participants were the same person at the end of the study as they were when we first began the journey together. Elsie spoke about feeling more fulfilled and being able to relate and connect better when working in a cross-racial group. Esme described feeling more self-aware as a result of having participated. The experience has caused her to reflect more on her conversations with her husband and how to be more patient. She knows that she cannot assume that people know when they are being offensive or racist, and she understands now the need to pause and contemplate that. Janice shared how being a co-inquirer in this study had expanded her social network which has usually consisted of other Black people. She has found herself being okay sharing with people outside her normal group of friends and being able to trust a White person. I have changed significantly in how I

perceive my own ability to interact with people without feeling like I need to prove myself. Being a part of this collaborative has given me the confidence in what I have to share and how I can contribute to relationships with individuals who are not like me. Like the other participants shared, I have struggled with a feeling of inadequacy all my life. Having participated in this study with such an intensely committed group has given me the strength to feel powerful and capable of impacting change. We each experienced growth in the area of interpersonal skills, and in the cross-racial context in particular. Although there have been positive experiences derived from the study, for each of us, there is a question that remained in each of our minds. Now that we have arrived at such a deeper level of understanding of what it takes to be vulnerable among our racially diverse group that would not have happened otherwise, what is the next step for us in on this journey so we can keep transforming ourselves? Although nobody could verbalize a concrete next step, we knew that this would not be the end of us.

Chapter Summary

The success that the participants in this study felt upon its conclusion can be attributed to certain components that are essential to collaborative human inquiry. Each participant was willing and eager to explore their vulnerability and take it to a deeper level beyond the surface in order to increase our chances of answering the research questions. This characteristic made it possible for us to enact authentic collaboration at every stage of the three research cycles. Another contributing factor to our ability to remain fully engaged authentically was the time dedicated to generating the norms which governed our interactions with each other, and the activities that helped us build a relationship with each other and community among each other. As we engaged with each

other, progressing from one research cycle to the next, the data we co-constructed stands up to validity checks because we continually focused on adhering to four specific strategies that reinforce the validity of the data. Simultaneously, each co-inquirer remained focused on the purpose of the study, exploring our individual and collective experiences of vulnerability, and allowed themselves to remain immersed in those experiences no matter how uncomfortable or risky. Using the extended epistemological model of the fourfold way of knowing as an anchor for our work, our experiences were also inevitably transformative. The practice of being vulnerable by sharing our experiences in ways that presented our deepest thoughts and emotions, we learned how to increase our interpersonal and intrapersonal skills when it concerns cross-racial relationships. In doing so, we uncovered themes that inspired a possible theory of action, thus creating a potential for social change. "Such personal transformation, by virtue of the inquirers' presence in and interaction with the research domain, extends into social and environmental transformation" (Heron, 1996, p. 107). A detailed summary of the findings and the interpretation of those findings in relation to the research topic and questions is provided in the following two chapters.

V. FINDINGS

The findings resulting from four co-inquirers representing five different ethnicities coming together and engaging vulnerably with one another across three research cycles of balanced reflection and action will be described below. Prior to discussing the findings, it is useful to be reminded of the action in which we were immersed for each respective research cycle.

For the first research cycle, the first action was to share two different stories: one when we found it difficult to be vulnerable across racial lines and one when we demonstrated vulnerability and how others reacted. These stories were to be presented as a Venn Story Diagram, with the intersection of two stories depicting our emotions and feelings at play in both situations.

For the second research cycle, we chose to dig deeper into our feelings by creating original sentence stems that we felt would target our deep-rooted fears and mistrust when interacting with others from a different race or ethnicity. We had to remain highly vulnerable as we responded honestly to these prompts. As we rotated turns to complete the sentences, we also took time to process how our answers impacted our state of being vulnerable, whether we were in the believing, thinking, feeling, or acting quadrant.

For the third and final research cycle, the co-inquirers and I decided we needed to examine how mutual vulnerability could be introduced into situations that we had experienced or witnessed ourselves that were racially biased. We wanted to use what we discovered about our own vulnerability in the first two cycles to help influence how a greater interconnectedness could be achieved in lieu of greater social distance, social

misunderstanding, or social hate and violence. To this end, each co-inquirer was tasked with sharing five scenarios depicting barriers that could help us identify how to draw out courage for mutual vulnerability in cross-racial relationships.

Collective Findings: Paired Themes

I used the five-phased cycle of compiling, disassembling, reassembling, interpreting, and concluding advanced by Yin (2011) to code and analyze the data. For research action #1, during the reflection stage, the co-inquirers and I collaboratively listed and compiled 46 commonalities that characterized our ability and our inability to be vulnerable in the cross-racial stories we shared. We organized these onto the fourfold model of knowing to see how they represented our experiential, presentational, propositional, and practical beliefs concerning vulnerability in cross-racial spaces. Following the meeting, I disassembled them on my own into nine affinity groups, then reassembled them into eight themes. Thus, analyzing the data from the telling of two different stories of our ability to be vulnerable contrasted with our inability to be vulnerable across racial lines surfaced eight themes: risk-taking toward action, vulnerability, awareness of self, awareness of or interactions with others, White entitlement, institutional racism, prior experiences, and storytelling. This revealed the common elements regarding how we practiced/experienced vulnerability in cross-racial situations, which is one of the research questions.

For research action #2, completing the eleven sentence stems required each participant to look honestly at their own cross-racial interactions and relationships. Since we did not have time to compile the responses collectively, I compiled the 44 responses on my own and organized them onto the fourfold model of knowing. This illustrated how

our deep-rooted emotions mapped onto the four types of knowledge, primarily experiential and practical. I then disassembled them into 100 smaller units/phrases, then reassembled them onto the eight existing themes, plus two new themes. The analysis of these data resulting from our individual responses to the sentence stems surfaced these two new illuminating and opposing themes: a sense of inferiority or inadequacy and the concept of empathic attunement. This uncovered our deeply rooted fears and mistrust when interacting with racially or ethnically different others, which addressed another research question.

For research action #3, the last research cycle, we compiled all our racist scenarios together. A few of us shared more than the required five, so we had plenty of examples to discuss. As a group, we then chose to reassemble them into categories so we could see what they had in common, and how they were opportunities to draw out courage for vulnerability. This resulted in four categories of real-world racist examples: media and visual images, institutions such as education, travel, medical, sports, the goods/services industry including retail, grocery, and one-to-one interactions. Since this was the last meeting, we felt we needed to directly address the last part of the research questions by delving into these categories to see how racial barriers within these levels of society in our institutions and organizations, communities and groups, and individuals, could be mitigated by creating opportunities for vulnerability.

Following the meeting, to be faithful to Yin's analysis method (2011), I wanted to engage the same coding process used for the other two cycles. I compiled the 30 scenarios and organized them onto the fourfold model, but they were all experiential knowledge. This made sense since the action was to share examples based on what we

had personally experienced or witnessed. I disassembled them into 69 smaller units/phrases, then reassembled them onto the ten existing themes, plus two more additional themes. Thus, after individually analyzing the data generated from the sharing of scenarios where we personally experienced racism or witnessed it ourselves, I was able to discern two final themes: a lack of self-awareness and assumptions of others.

Upon considering these twelve themes, I paired them into dyads that helped construct the collective story of our experiences across multiple research cycles. See Table 1 for a summary of themes paired into dyads.

Table 1. Summary of Themes Paired into Dyads.		
Research Action #1	risk-taking toward action	vulnerability
	awareness of self	awareness of or interactions with others
	White entitlement	institutional racism
	prior experiences	storytelling
Research Action #2	inferiority or inadequacy	empathic attunement
Research Action #3	lack of self-awareness	assumptions of others

Risk-Taking and Vulnerability

We found through our collaborative human inquiry work that it is necessary to acknowledge the discomfort that may accompany being vulnerable and take the risk anyway in efforts to foster and generate positive cross-racial interactions and relationships. Being vulnerable in the face of those with whom we seek connection called for each of us to be brave. Brown (2012) offers us our definition of vulnerability as "uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure" (p. 34). To be vulnerable is to take risks. As co-inquirers, we each shared two stories during the first research cycle: one describing when we were able to demonstrate vulnerability, and one describing when we could not be or when it was difficult to be vulnerable. To illustrate the paired theme of risk-taking and vulnerability, I will provide examples of the former since they reveal how we each

took the risk to be vulnerable. The stories concerning when it was difficult to be vulnerable will be explained under the theme of inadequacy and inferiority since they exemplified our fear of being rejected or dismissed.

Elsie's story. Elsie's example of when she demonstrated vulnerability pertained to an opportunity she had to co-lead a session at a race and equity symposium. She, along with two other White women, were asked to talk about how they use an equity lens in their respective work. Her description of the experience follows:

> So there were three of us up there, and I needed to share my downfalls and how, when I step in it, I've got to step out of it. And even though I might step in it again in another moment, then I've got to step out of it. And unless I do that and talk to people about it, even if I don't talk about it well, or I get better and better at talking about it well, that that's... I can't not do that, because otherwise it just continues all the situations that are a part of the institutional racism that we sit in. So that was a time that I demonstrated vulnerability, and while it was uncomfortable, and I felt fear, and rejection, and stupidity and hoping that it wasn't doing harm, and that I wasn't setting anything back.

Her narrative clearly shows her apprehension about saying the wrong thing and then having to search for a way to remedy the situation. This is indicated by her statement of stepping in "it" and needing to step out of "it". The desire to resolve any harm she was afraid of creating by misspeaking is indicative of her bravery and risk-taking in embracing such uncertainty on the part of the audience reaction. Elsie's creativity, and hope, showed in her presentation of this story as seen in Figure 4 below. At the intersection of this story when she could be vulnerable and of the story when she could

not, are feelings that she experienced in both encounters. In her description below, she explained her motivation behind the colors.

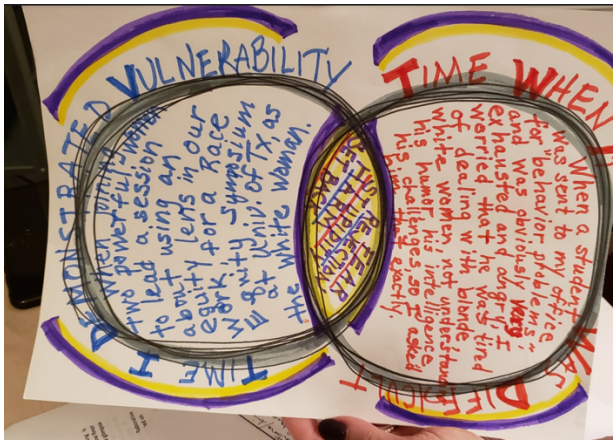


Figure 4: Elsie's Venn Diagram

And when I was thinking about how to put it together, I color coded two different experiences, one blue, one red, purple, mixture of the two colors because they were the feelings that I had. And when I was done with the blue and the red, I knew... And that the feelings are not positive. I knew that that there were positive feelings, and so I was trying to pull that out, so I put yellow in because of hope. That even though there were negative feelings, I do continue to hold onto hope.

Each of the participant's Venn Story diagrams can be seen in Appendix J.

Esme's story. The story that Esme shared about her vulnerability across racial lines was a situation that happened between her and her husband. During a conversation about whether they would have children in their future, her White husband made the mistake of claiming that he could teach them more about Arab culture than she could because he was well read. She described her thought process in approaching the situation:

> And it's not the first time that I've encountered weird situations like this, but in this case, we had already built a very strong relationship and I really cared about him and I thought, "you know what, instead of getting really angry, which I was, instead of getting really angry and just writing him off, this might be a learning opportunity for him." And so I thought about it overnight and the next day I explained to him how inappropriate that was and how insulting it was and how disrespectful it was and that it was not his place to decide what parts of me I get to celebrate.

Esme chose to act vulnerably by expressing how his comment made her feel, rather than react with anger. Granted, this situation occurred between her and her husband, someone with whom she is intimately connected and with whom it might be easier to be vulnerable. However, one could also say that it might be more difficult to be vulnerable with loved ones since the fear of being rejected is greater, making the risk greater. In this case, she took the risk in telling him how his comment hurt her, and his reaction was one of equal vulnerability demonstrated by his admission of feeling "mortified". Esme made a conscious decision to be brave and vulnerable.

Janice's story. For Janice, her experience was in the role of parent who was meeting with school administrators because her daughter was struggling in class. She knew that she would be walking into a room as the only Black person, surrounded by White people. She could have chosen to not engage with the school administrators, but took the risk and emotionally exposed herself on behalf of her daughter:

> Although I walked in very much aware that I was a Black person in a White space. So I wore my badge, I stood back, I was calm, and I just asked, "How can I

> assist my child? And I want to know what it is that she knows and what she's missing." Even in that, I was classified as an angry Black woman. So I made an appointment to meet with the administrators. This is where it's difficult to be vulnerable. So I walked into that meeting knowing that that's what we shared, knowing that's what I was facing. And I was quite frankly pissed off because I had tears, not because I was sad, but because I was pissed off and I couldn't do anything. Even in trying to advocate for my child, I knew I couldn't do anything.

Janice's experience of being vulnerable did not meet with the results she had hoped for, unfortunately. Janice's resignation with trying to navigate the educational system for her daughter was poignantly manifested in a poem that she wrote and shared to accompany her narrative:

> So I sat across the table knowing little would be done, yet I had to make the effort though my voice is only one. Putting words to concepts, to impact, to outcomes that these biases and blind spots cause us to trust some and doubt some. And I get nodding heads and hollow words, each with the kindest intentions, Whiteness and racism have complicated dimensions, to soothe over just enough to say, "It's been brought to my attention."

In spite of these unfavorable results following her attempts at vulnerability, Janice still showed commitment to continue to make the effort and take the risk.

Thymai's story. My example of being vulnerable took place in a public setting and involved a pair of White older strangers who decided to take over the table at which I was sitting, even though there were other empty tables in the coffeehouse. I expressed to

my fellow co-inquirers how the situation made me feel confused and humiliated prior to approaching them:

> I gathered my things, I approached them and I said a few words. I told them I was not sure what just happened, but that I felt disrespected, that I was not sure what their behavior meant, but that it made me feel very little. I told them that I hoped they never treat anyone else like they treated me again. She tried to apologize, but it did not feel sincere. He told me to take that somewhere else…

Although the responses from these strangers I encountered were not favorable, the important thing is that I chose to face the older couple and tell them how their actions made me feel. The act of being vulnerable in this case felt particularly risky because it took place in a very public setting and I could feel the eyes of everyone in the coffeehouse staring at me, waiting for my reaction. I was incredibly shaky on the inside, but felt strong on the outside for overcoming my fear of how they might have responded.

For all of us, there was much uncertainty of how the situations would unfold, but we each chose to take the risk and expose our emotions to those who were racially and ethnically different from us. These were situations which made us proud because we took the risk and acted vulnerably despite the uncertainty. Elsie's and Esme's stories show how vulnerability can lead to positive outcomes. Janice's story and my own did not have the same favorable results. Nonetheless, we know it is necessary to keep making the effort and taking the risk.

Awareness of Self and Interactions with Others

As co-inquirers, we found that it was necessary to look at our own selves critically to see how our negative emotions such as fear, pride, or shame prevented us

from speaking our truths and being vulnerable when engaging with racially or ethnically different others. Initially, I had not been able to be honest with myself about how I thought White people perceived me because of a feeling that I was inferior to them. During the second research cycle as I engaged in the sentence stem action, I divulged, with hesitation:

> When I'm vulnerable across racial lines, what's racist in me is when I'm in a room with other people of color, I feel at ease. When I'm in a room with only White people, I'm making a lot of assumptions about how they perceive me because of my fear of feeling inferior to them.

Acknowledging this behavior in myself has allowed me to take the next steps toward improving my relationships with cross-racial others. As we were discussing our responses to the sentence stems during the reflection stage, I expressed: "Yeah my two former answers were both in the whole inferiority and adequacy thing, which again lines up with what I've been saying is I need to stop playing this victim and believing that I'm inferior and be more active." Being able to admit this to others in this cross-racial inquiry group speaks to my own transformation toward being more vulnerable.

Janice shared a similar sentiment to mine, of feeling inferior when she described feeling like she needed to prove her worth to White people. During our first interview, when reflecting on her initial experiences with our cross-racial inquiry, she divulged, "So I mean that was extremely vulnerable for me because I feel like whenever I say something, it has to have value and weight because typically that has to be the case to be heard." Later in the study during the second research cycle, one of the sentence stems read as "Whiteness is so desperately defended because…" We agreed it had to be phrased

this way to cause us to dig deep to see what we were doing to maintain Whiteness as the status quo. Janice experienced an insight that showed her self-awareness: "Whiteness is so desperately defended because I feel the need to prove my worth in comparison to it." She elaborated further, "I bought into the lie that it is the standard by which everything else is measured so much so that I don't even see it sometimes, as a person of color."

She also helped us realize that for the person of color, it can be exhausting to feel like you have to keep fighting the racial battle:

> Because I don't always let people see or know how something lands on me, especially when it's a racial incident that happens. I usually just decompress with people that I feel super safe with and those are usually Black people who understand and get it. And I don't have to do a whole lot of explaining background stuff and giving all this historical knowledge and it's just... And being exhausted just to explain one little thing.

However, Janice, referring to the concept of learned helplessness (Seligman, 1972), also shared that we have to be cautious about it if we are intent on changing our cross-racial relationships through mutual vulnerability. "It's like you're not helpless because you are helpless. You're helpless because that's what you've been trained to be. One experience after another after another. You just go, okay. I learned it because that was the experiences." Her words indicate the resignation that underscores her past cross-racial experiences, but she is self-aware in knowing that this cannot be her usual practice. Janice described her experience with the inquiry group as follows:

> Nothing's hindered my vulnerability. I feel like I can be my authentic self with our group. I don't feel like I have to hold anything back. As a matter of fact, I feel

> myself exploring and questioning why I'm feeling what I'm feeling or noticing what I'm noticing, where in any other space, I would just think it and it would stay with me. Whereas with our group, I'm verbalizing what I'm thinking, and I'm not keeping it to myself as much.

She offered a powerful perspective regarding sharing the space with a White woman. "Sitting in a room with a White person who is genuinely trying to do the work has helped me to see and not be so skeptical of White partners." This level of self-awareness will hopefully help enhance her relationships with White people after the study has concluded.

Elsie shared that she must be willing to "unpeel layers so I can be a part of that change or shift." In her first interview with me, she expressed enjoying the experience of being able to work on herself, but always having some anxiety in these spaces due to not wanting to say something inappropriate. "I almost always feel this walking into any kind of situation that is cross-cultural is that I don't make anyone feel bad, or that I don't offend anyone." It is a constant worry for her as a White woman regardless of how safe the space feels. Although the collaborative spirit of the group and the structure of the inquiry helped Elsie to accept the discomfort of being in a group with non-White others, she expressed the following to me in her second interview:

> I think we worked really hard at it. I think everyone really walked into this with the intention of peeling some layers, and I think that's what happened. I think there's a lot more to go with vulnerability. I know, myself, I felt myself hesitating in the last couple sessions and I think that's just a matter of time.

In her second interview, Elsie restated her love of opportunities to stretch although she seemed to understand her vulnerable role as the White woman in the group:

> I was very much made aware that I'm the White person in the group and that's just part of my role. I mean, I do understand that and I knew that walking in…I probably do feel a higher level of accountability as a White person making a difference from one person in the group than the others.

In this way she told me that she understands that she has unearned privilege and tries not to take it personally, conceding that she should be held accountable. Elsie said she is self-aware that she had to take the risk and remain vulnerable, or otherwise she would not change or grow. From my experience, this level of awareness of White privilege is more uncommon than common.

Similarly, Esme stated her desire "to not shy away and to power through the discomfort so I can walk away feeling proud of myself." During her first interview with me, she spoke freely, and vulnerably, about being vulnerable with her fellow co-inquirers:

> I mean, I think for, at least for me, it's not something that I typically do, and that is to express vulnerability when it comes to my ethnicity or my race, my upbringing, the culture that I was exposed to and also not just expressing the vulnerabilities that... The upbringing that I had, there are a lot of things that we didn't talk about or we weren't allowed to feel or express and things like that. So, being able to talk about those things that were uncomfortable, it's not easy but it's really interesting to be able to share that with people who are so different than I am. But at the same time, not that different at all. If that makes any sense?

Esme shared a level of self-awareness regarding how vulnerability was not a part of her normal practice in life. She referenced her cultural background and how vulnerability was not encouraged in her family. When responding to why Whiteness was so desperately defended, she replied that it was because "of lack of self-awareness in others and in myself." Despite the lack of experience being vulnerable, Esme made herself vulnerable and admitted that her lack of awareness of how she perpetuated the White dominant standard. Following is a description of a self-realization she made regarding her interactions with Elsie:

> I think specifically when it comes to getting the perspective of a White woman, that's been really, really interesting. I think just like with anybody, assumptions are made and it's so easy to make assumptions. But she's given me a lot of perspective on what things are like for an enlightened White woman, I guess, if we can call it that. So it was really interesting to hear how aware she is of these things that I've dealt with all my life, and how things look from her side of things. So that's been really interesting.

This realization ultimately led to her concluding, "And so we can't just assume that somebody knows that they're being offensive or racist. So I think it does cause me to pause before reacting." This ability to pause before reacting could be the decision point to be vulnerable as opposed to the alternative, jumping to assumptions about racially or ethnically different others.

We each came to value our ability in being aware of our role in fostering meaningful cross-racial interactions and relationships. By being willing to look within ourselves deeply, we were able to uncover our fears, and our own internal barriers, and

face them in order to act authentically and vulnerably with each other, and hopefully, with others we will encounter in the future. What we discovered based on our individual and collective experiences around vulnerability in a cross-racial context is that self-awareness is an essential component for greater human interconnectedness.

White Entitlement and Institutional Racism

Our findings support the existence of White entitlement, or worse, the existence and of institutions that promote racism in the United States. During the first research cycle, as we listed the commonalities around our experiences being and not being vulnerable, the propositional knowledge we co-constructed centered on phrases such as "White bubble" and "naming racism". A poignant exchange occurred between Elsie, the White woman in the group, and Esme as Elsie explained to Esme, the mixed-race woman, the concept of White bubble. Following are Elsie's words to Esme, pertaining to the story of the vulnerable experience involving Esme's White husband:

> The White bubble is that you create it in this environment that protects you from ever thinking about the conversation that you had with your husband. He never had to think about it because his whole life has been in this bubble where he didn't have to think about it.

As Esme let the information sink in, Elsie continued:

> So that's where I hear people say things like, "I'm not racist." White people who say, "I'm not racist." But what they're really saying (pause) is, "I lived in a White bubble, and I don't dislike people of color." That's what they're really trying to say. Whereas this person over here chooses to not like people of color, and I'm not them, so I'm not racist, not understanding the big picture that (pause) bi-dynamic

> by the whole foot of oppression, the cultural everything White people are obviously racist. But it's pretty hard to say in a group of White people.

Another dynamic exchange happened between Janice and me regarding the need to name racism and call it what it is. In reference to both my stories where I encountered White people who seemed entitled to me, Janice addressed that those were indeed both examples of White entitlement, and furthermore racism.

> When you were sharing, one of the things that you shared was that you didn't want to believe that it was about race. That it could have just been entitlement, but you weren't sure on both sides, right? I think so. That's exactly what I thought when you were sharing. I don't know if it's about race, but when you're talking about White people it's about race. The minute you think it's about race, it's about race. Naming it. To me you name it. You call it what it is. We don't want to call it that. It's like the doubt, this maybe I'm just, and it's race.

It is remarkable that following the first research action, it was the White woman and the Black woman in the group educating the other co-inquirers about White bubble and racism. Just as Esme voiced how learning the former concept had opened her eyes to a new term she never knew of prior to the study, Janice's urging that I name racism when I see it deeply resonated with me. I elaborate on this realization below when I discuss our individual findings.

In responding to the sentence stems regarding our cross-racial interactions or relationships, similar phrases emerged such as dismantling Whiteness, dominant culture, inequitable power dynamics. We have seen how self-aware Elsie is regarding her White privilege and this was further demonstrated in her responses to the sentence stem about

what we each were committed to when it came to being vulnerable across racial lines. Since we answered this prompt twice, at the start of the action and again at the end of the action, I will share both of Elsie's commitments. Initially she shared, "When I'm vulnerable across racial lines, I'm committed to dismantling my Whiteness." Ultimately, her commitment evolved into "When I'm vulnerable across racial lines, I'm committed to listening more, unpacking crap, walking into the fire, and dismantling as much as I can, in an inequitable power dynamic."

Another sentence stem was stated as "When I'm vulnerable across racial lines, who or what frightens me is…" My response to this prompt was:

> because I don't look like the dominant culture, because I wasn't born here, that I'll never be accepted, I'll never feel I have the right to be here in this country, and I'll always have to try to prove myself, that I do deserve to be here.

The reference to a dominant culture alludes to the White hegemonic society which marginalizes and others those who are non-White.

When responding to her fear about the White race, Esme replied, "When I'm vulnerable across racial lines, my own fear about the White race is that I also don't fit perceived standards of how I should be." This aligns with the existence of a White standard, or status quo, against which those of us who are persons of color compare ourselves. She added, "I believe society and my family taught me that the White race is superior." For Janice, her fear was expressed as follows:

> When I'm vulnerable across racial lines, who frightens me, are people who are silent, because I fear that again, that my vulnerability will be weaponized and

> used to harm me, and that they are not invested, or there's no urgency to change the status quo.

Our responses were punctuated with elements of White entitlement and institutionalized racism.

As we shared our personal experiences of racist scenarios during the last research cycle, it was not conceptual phrases referring to White entitlement or institutional racism which surfaced, but very specific examples of their existence in all levels of society. Elsie shared her personal experience as a consumer of media:

> Yeah. Watching commercials on TV, they show White people as successful and people of color as needing help, repeatedly. Over and over and over again. NPR radio shows, National Public Radio, touted as the elite radio shows and the discussions, the situations for almost all of the shows are devoid of any culture and very White-centric.

Janice contributed examples which conveyed the prevalence of a White dominant culture:

> When you are presented with silhouettes, they're always White. For example, my kid gets player of the game, and they just put a silhouette there, it's always a White girl. Every trophy, they're White. Family Feud and Trivia, always the White perspective. They might as well say they asked 10 White people. Test scores determine aptitude. That's White. Hallmark movies. They're all White, because apparently we don't do holidays. I'm serious.

For me and Esme, our examples did not contain phrases explicitly mentioning White entitlement, but our scenarios emphasized situations where those who are not White are viewed as inferior in comparison to a White standard. This will be further explicated in

that particular section below addressing inferiority and inadequacy. By examining these examples, we saw that it is necessary to find ways to dismantle closed minds in our society. We can do this by recognizing racism, naming it, and then using our vulnerability through a heightened self-awareness to mediate it. We knew this would not be easy, but we each were willing to commit and do our part.

Prior Experiences and Storytelling

Given that no human is completely separated from their past, we were not surprised to find that our prior experiences with cross-racial interactions and relationships could influence our ability to be vulnerable in our present. During the first research cycle, by sharing our two contrasting stories of being vulnerable and the difficulty of being vulnerable, this action resulted in four individual stories that were then co-constructed into a collective group story from which emerged similarities in how we acted and did not act vulnerably in those prior cross-racial spaces. One of those similarities and the theme addressed here is the influence of how those past experiences impacted when it comes to being vulnerable. With regards to the story she shared when she was vulnerable, Janice stated:

> I expected what happened to happen, but I hoped that it would be different. I was trying to give it a chance, I had a realistic expectation, it was a realistic optimism, knowing that it's probably not gonna happen, but I'm gonna try anyway.

Her comment revealed a level of resignation when interacting with White people, but it also indicated that she will continue to keep trying, to keep being vulnerable. This is demonstrated in Janice's response during the second action to the stem which was stated as "When I'm vulnerable across racial lines, my own unfinished work is…" She

completed it as follows, “to allow space for White people who are a part of this work and trying to make a difference.” Janice could have let her sense of realistic optimism color how she moved forward with the inquiry group, but it is clear by her response that her intent is to not let that happen. Furthermore, during her second interview, she divulged this perspective regarding her experience in this study: “Sitting in a room with a White person who is genuinely trying to do the work has helped me to see and not be so skeptical of White partners.”

During the second action, Esme responded to the sentence stem which read as, “When I’m vulnerable across racial lines, I want the other person to…so that I don’t feel othered.” Her insertion was, “I want the other person to value me as much as a White woman would be valued so I don’t feel othered.” The sense that Esme referred to of being othered aligns with the story she shared when spending time with the Caucasian family during her solo wine tasting adventure. In that particular situation, Esme gave in to her perception that people who are racially or ethnically different from her lack empathy or the will to understand. This assumption prevented her from being vulnerable with them, from divulging her racial background as being mixed Mexican and Arab.

> So I didn't say that I was half Palestinian, just didn't feel right. And also that question, "What are you?" So I've learned to not let that trigger me and it never really has. It's bothered me, but I've never acted on it. So yeah, that was a situation where I just wasn't ... I was too fearful of being vulnerable and expressing and saying like, "Well yeah, I'm this and I'm this." And number one, it's not their business. But I was like, "This is such a good time. They're such lovely people." And they probably wouldn't have cared. They probably wouldn't

> have cared, and I didn't give them the opportunity to show that they were decent people.

As we engaged in the second action with her, Esme showed her commitment to not allow this experience to taint her ability to be vulnerable in the future. "When I'm vulnerable across racial lines, I'm committed to being patient with others, and seeing it as an opportunity to connect."

For Elsie, the regret described in her story when she found it difficult to be vulnerable is compounded by her awareness of her White privilege, and how she attempts to navigate her Whiteness to relate meaningfully to persons of color. These are her words regarding the Black student who was sent to her office when she worked as an elementary school principal:

> So I still put it in that category of, it was really difficult to be vulnerable because what I wanted to say to this eight year old kid was, in my thinking, this was a blonde, White music teacher who sent him to the office. He had, one of the two teachers was a blonde, White third grade teacher, and the year before, he had had a blonde, White teacher. And here was this blonde, White principal. And all of that hit me, swimming there, thinking, how do I approach this human being in front of me, in a system that is broken, to try to make this better?

She added, "That whole situation sits with me a lot, still." Elsie's wish to be vulnerable coupled with the fear of saying the wrong thing is poignantly manifested in one of her responses during the second action. "When I'm vulnerable across racial lines, my own fear about people of color, is that they're done with me and don't see value or potential in working together." Her past experiences have caused her to fear that others do not see

her worth as a White woman trying to do the right thing. However, because of her strong desire to contribute to making our society a more loving and accepting one, Elsie will not let this fear hinder her ability to be vulnerable when interacting with persons of color. Early on in the study, she declared:

> I need to say something with that one because sometimes fear fuels my... It doesn't hinder it. It pushes it, because my fear of a world continuing in the way that it is, pushes my vulnerability to do something to be more vulnerable.

Although both of my stories of vulnerability shared during the first research cycle involved encounters with older White strangers, I was able to be vulnerable in one, but unable in the other. In the case of the latter, I described the situation as follows:

> Instead of being vulnerable, I became defensive. I pretended to take pictures of their car. Not proud of this. I pretended that I would report them. One lady asked if I had a problem. I did, but I could not verbalize it. Instead of being vulnerable, I said that I was good, that it was all good…. So that's my story about, I couldn't be vulnerable, I don't know why. I don't know why I couldn't. I felt angry, inferior, incredulous, annoyed, shaky, and I just couldn't comprehend.

I actually used the word "shaky" to describe how I felt in both situations. Later in the study as we finished the sentence stems in the second research cycle, one of my responses was as follows: "When I'm vulnerable across racial lines, my own unfinished work is, when interacting with a White person, to face the fear that automatically surfaces, or rises within me." I did not realize that my prior experiences with White people generated this fear inside of me because I have many White friends, and I volunteer through Hospice Austin and have worked closely with many older White strangers. Yet, I confessed

during our inquiry that this fear of always feeling less than is true. In another response, I shared, "When I'm vulnerable across racial lines, my own fear about White people, is that I will never be good enough to be considered their equal." It would be easy for me to allow these negative emotions to hinder my ability to show vulnerability in future interactions, but like my fellow co-inquirers, and most likely being inspired by them, my commitment is to "playing less the victim and advocating more for myself and others."

Through the different research cycle actions that we as co-inquirers collaboratively chose to engage in order to address the research questions, we were able to powerfully share our prior experiences through storytelling. By way of sharing our individual stories for the first action, we were able co-construct a collective story woven together by commonalities. For the second action where we had to finish our sentences in the most direct and vulnerable way, we co-constructed a collective story depicting our deepest emotions. And during the last research cycle, we chose to share racist scenarios we had experienced with the positive intent of drawing out a way for individuals to be vulnerable in cross-racial spaces and break down those barriers of fear and mistrust. This also resulted in a collective story of what we experienced individually. These three co-constructed stories also allowed our personal ways of thinking, feeling, believing, and acting when it comes to being vulnerable to find an outlet for expression. Esme captured these storytelling experiences perfectly:

> We're telling these stories, and we're talking about our experiences, and we're not just hearing them. We're feeling the emotions attached to all that. They're shared stories, and so there's almost this connection that we have because we've kind of dug deep, and we've exposed all these really uncomfortable emotions and

> situations that we don't really like to talk about. So I think everybody's done their part in kind of contributing to that, fostering trust-building relationship.

Even though we each identified as a different race or ethnicity, we found a common desire to share stories in creative ways through poetry, drawings and use of color. In other words, our vulnerability manifested itself in multiple ways. Following is how I approached my own storytelling:

> So instead of telling you the whole story, I'm just going to read the story to you that I captured in just short phrases. It wasn't meant to be poetry, but for me it kind of was as I told the story, and I color coded because I'm a nerd. So the things in this story that happened that made me sad, I highlighted in blue. The things in the story where I felt I was vulnerable, I highlighted in pink, the heart. And the things in the story that made me angry, I highlighted in red.

This is an example of how my story was written to illustrate how the colors were used to emphasize my emotions:

> One lady asked if I had a problem
>
> I did, but I could not verbalize it
>
> Instead of being vulnerable, I said that I was good, that it was all good
>
> Three more similar interactions
>
> With the same group
>
> In the same situation
>
> At the same time
>
> They did not learn, they seemed not to care

We found that we each could relate to each other based on our individual prior experiences that were then woven together into collective stories. Regardless of how they impacted us in the past, we discovered that we must choose to transform how we react in future interactions and commit instead to efforts at greater connection with others across the racial divide.

Inferiority/Inadequacy and Empathic Attunement

The most impactful finding from our time together was the pervasive sense of inferiority or inadequacy that we either placed on ourselves, or that others placed on us. The most thought-provoking finding that presented itself in our data was the notion of empathic attunement and whether or not it is an attainable state even given our commitment to use vulnerability as a tool for greater cross-racial interconnectedness. The inferiority theme surfaced during the second action stage after we participated in the sentence stems action, which required us to dig deep into ourselves and respond to those direct prompts from a place of extreme vulnerability. The apprehension in the room prior to engaging in this particular activity was palpable. Following is an extract from our initial reflection stage as we planned the research action mentioned above:

> Me: It's a good stress eating, though, because I'm chomping as I'm processing and taking it in just like... Oh my God, I created this.
>
> Janice: Oh, it's going to get real.
>
> Elsie: We walked into this.
>
> Janice: We did.
>
> Esme: Yeah, we did.
>
> Janice: It's about to get real. Real early.

Elsie: We walked in here because we wanted to get into this. If not us, who? I share this to illustrate the gumption with which each co-inquirer was ready to engage in a vulnerable action about being vulnerable with those who are racially or ethnically different from us. I hope it further gives validation to the responses that resulted concerning our fears of inferiority and inadequacy as well as our desires for empathic attunement.

One of the sentence stems was stated as, "When I'm vulnerable across racial lines, I assume that their stereotype of me is…" The "their" refers to those who are racially or ethnically different from us. Janice responded, "…that I can't add value, that I'm unintelligent, and that my responses are easily dismissed." Elsie replied, "that I'm a silly, blonde White woman who can't see beyond Whiteness." Esme finished the sentence as "that I'm out of place." My response was as follows, "that I am smart and that I don't have any difficulties or challenges." Although my statement does not reflect inferiority in the same way as the others, I chose to include it to show how I felt that stereotypes still exist from the perspective of White people regarding Asians. These assumptions that my fellow co-inquirers shared highlight their common fears of being perceived as less than. What is interesting is Elsie's remark about her own inadequacy considering her vantage point as a White woman. This is powerful because it demonstrates that inferiority and inadequacy exist on both sides of the racial and ethnic divide.

Another sentence stem asked us to complete the prompt, "When I'm vulnerable across racial lines, I'm afraid of…" I replied that I was afraid of "falling apart, seeming weak, and confirming their opinion that I'm inferior." Elsie said she was afraid of

"saying something stupid without realizing it, and hurting someone." Esme completed the sentence with "being dismissed." Janice's response was the disconfirming evidence in this prompt by stating she was afraid that "the information, feelings, thoughts, fears that I share will be weaponized and used against me." For her, the prompt triggered less a fear of an inferiority and more one of being harmed due to what she shares in a cross-racial space. For the rest of us, our fears hinged on seeming weak, stupid, or being completely ignored, indicative of our perception that racially different others viewed us as inferior. Again, it is important to emphasize Elsie's vulnerable response as the White woman in the inquiry group who also can feel inadequate when interacting with persons of color.

Sharing of these deepest, innermost feelings was difficult. In spite of this risk, each of us knew we had to put this out there in order to say that we authentically engaged with the research topic. For the final research cycle, the goal behind our decision to share the racist scenarios that we personally experienced or witnessed was to see how enacting vulnerability could mediate those situations. Findings from this last action data also revealed the theme of inferiority and inadequacy, such as White people having low expectations toward people of color. Specific examples included giving compliments to people of color but being surprised that they could be articulate or intelligent, asking a Latinx customer if they could speak English, and questioning people of color when they enter a bank as if they had different motives.

Contrary to the disparagement that all of the co-inquirers described experiencing, we also described holding optimistic wishes and desires toward not only an increased sense of human interconnectedness, but a desire for empathic attunement. Even though

we felt hurt when we encountered cross-racial situations that made us feel inferior or inadequate, we still wanted to connect with others across that divide. During the sentence stem action, I expressed wanting them to "see themselves in me" and Janice wished for them to "put themselves in my shoes" and "hear me as if I were a White person." Esme expressed her desire for them to "value me as much as a White woman would be valued". Elsie stated her wish that others would "see me beyond my Whiteness." In our desire to be vulnerable and connect with others who are racially and ethnically different, we would need to care for the feelings of others just as we care for ourselves. We found ourselves wanting to commit to this work by being empathic toward others "…in hopes of getting to a better place, not just for myself, but for people in my life" (Esme). For us, the question still remained whether empathic attunement is feasible or even necessary in order to feel humanly connected to another across racial lines.

Participation in the second research action resulted in feelings of inadequacy that revealed the most vulnerable sides of each co-inquirer. Nonetheless, what we discovered is that we each need to address and reconcile our feelings of inferiority and inadequacy so that we can at least move in the direction of seeing others on the same level as we see ourselves. This would be a demonstration of vulnerability, that would need to be reciprocated in order for mutual vulnerability, and human interconnectedness to be positively impacted within cross-racial relationships.

Lack of Self-Awareness and Assumptions About Others

Although this paired theme correlates with the previous one pertaining to the awareness of self and interactions of others, I include it as a separate theme to emphasize that a lack of awareness of self can lead to unfair assumptions about others who are

racially or ethnically different. The consequences of having a lack of self-awareness presented itself in our last research cycle when we examined racist situations that we had experienced or witnessed personally. These situations seemed to make concrete what could happen when individuals are not in tune with their thoughts and emotions nor willing to challenge those thoughts and emotions. Instead, there is potential to create harm by giving in to assumptions about others that can have disastrous effects at the expense of greater human interconnectedness.

Looking back to our own personal examples of when we became self-aware during the study can help frame how detrimental these scenarios are to greater connectedness. It was necessary for me to become aware that I was making automatic assumptions about White people perceiving me as inferior. Otherwise, my interactions and relationships with White people would continue to be underscored by a tension on my end that could prevent me from meaningfully connecting with them. During our last meeting prior to sharing our racist scenarios, I felt I needed to express the following:

> Because I'll use me as an example, just based on the data that's revealing itself to me. If I'm more aware that I've been playing this victim and that yeah, when I'm in a room with White people, I feel inferior, but then I'm not taking that active stance. Right? That I'm never going to change this…but if I'm not doing these things, then I'm not really going to change that narrative for myself.

For Janice, she needed to become aware that she was on the cusp of no longer giving White people a chance to show their worth. The experience of participating in the study alongside Elsie opened her eyes, mind, and heart.

> When I see White and Black people connect and make headway, something happens, and I want to know what that is. And so, that was what scared me, to get too close, too comfortable with who is White and then there'd be a breach of trust. This process has helped me to genuinely trust a White person.

Esme similarly experienced a shift in thinking as a result of being in the study. During our second interview, she shared a reflection on the inquiry experience:

> I think if anything, it's prompted me to be even more self-aware and also taking some of the stories that I've heard from the other women and absorbing that and getting a better understanding of their experiences. It's definitely eye opening because again, these aren't conversations that just happen every day. So, it's been nice to be able to release some of that, for me at least.

She elaborated:

> More so than before because now I have terms attached to some of these things and have a better understanding of what it's like on the other side. So there's some understanding there. I wouldn't say it's tolerance because that's a very different thing. So it's not necessarily tolerance, it's just an understanding that maybe this person doesn't realize how inappropriate that comment or that thing is.

Based on her words, it might be safe to assume that if Esme were to find herself in a situation similar to that of the wine-tasting encounter with the Caucasian family, her reaction to the "What are you" question might be different. She might respond with vulnerability and share her true mixed heritage.

With regards to Elsie's need to be self-aware rather than make assumptions about others, I cannot reiterate enough what a value it has been to have a White woman in the

study who is so committed to dismantling her White privilege. Through her contributions and comments, we have been able to clearly see what is needed to repair our cross-racial relationships. Elsie was hyper aware of the fact that if she did not act to change the status quo, the future could look very bleak for human interconnectedness. In her first interview, she admitted feeling somewhat anxious about the work ahead:

> My only anxiety is that I, and I always know this walking into any kind of situation that's a cross-cultural, is that that I don't make anyone feel bad or that I don't offend anyone. And it's not that, I mean I know that that could happen and that we are in a safe enough space that we can work on it, but I still worry about that.

During our second interview, she expressed still feeling the same anxiety. Regardless, Elsie is firm in her dedication, and her unique perspectives were more than well-received by her fellow co-inquirers of color.

> And I have privilege that's unearned on a regular basis. I try not to take it personally, but I am the person. I guess that must be what I was referring to that first time, and I certainly felt it in the last session as well. You're accountable. It's true. I am accountable, and I need to be accountable, and I need to continually be working all kinds of things.

So the question is, what happens if we do not hold ourselves accountable no matter what side of the racial divide we fall on? Based on the data from the third research cycle, a lack of self-awareness equated with a lack of awareness on the part of White people regarding their privilege. Examples that participants shared included the prevalence of White perspectives present in television game shows, lawn ornaments and

trophies or medals only depicting White characters and an existing belief system that White people are successful while people of color are questionable and suspect. Janice shared an example when she was shopping with her daughter at Target where they both noticed that the cosmetic options for darker skin were locked and secured. "In Target, any store, looking at lawn ornaments, you can only buy White people. Yeah, try finding a Black Santa. In the makeup aisle at Target, the darker the makeup, it becomes locked. Yeah." Esme provided an example at the animal shelter where she works of White volunteers commenting that when a Black man entered, he was probably looking for a pit bull to use as a fighting dog.

> The last one that I have, a White person sees a Black man looking for a pet at the shelter, makes a comment to an employee that the customer is likely looking for a pit bull to fight... I'll add that, a Black employee…he just walked away, just couldn't even... He's like, "I'm going to get fired" and just walked away.

As we reflected on these examples, it became apparent to the group that these racist scenarios existed at all levels of society: in our institutions such as education, travel, medical, sports; in our communities such as retail and grocery; and in our one-to-one interactions. During our post-reflection of this last research cycle, we found that what is needed is not only vulnerability, but mutual vulnerability. Janice captured this well in her words below:

> Well, I'm just thinking about when this has played out for me. And it's often right? When I have to be vulnerable and... Which is literally how I honestly feel that I have to live life because this society is not set up for my success. So I have to live vulnerability and take risks often. I'm hyper aware of myself and all of my

> surroundings because I have to be for self-preservation. How people respond and interact with. When I'm being vulnerable or sharing something with someone, they have the power and the option to not reciprocate that vulnerability and therefore my actions are based on how they react…So, I could do all the things and still not get to my end goal. Depending on who I'm interacting with and they're reciprocating and meeting me at the point of being vulnerable and taking a risk.

We contemplated her words, which made sense. Each of us could do our part in being vulnerable in a cross-racial interaction or relationship, but if the racially or ethnically different person with whom we are engaged does not reciprocate with their own vulnerability, there is an imbalance. Additionally, what we discovered from our racist scenario experiences and resulting data is that neither of the two is possible without a sense of self-awareness on the part of those who wish to engage in deep connections with others across racial lines. Following is an excerpt from the conversation that ensued as we continued our post-reflection stage for the last research action:

> Esme: And some people might not be ready to see that they're doing and saying things that are considered racist by people of color. So there's that denial, "like what? I'm not a racist."
>
> Thymai: And you know what we've done is we've pretty much, if we decide if, I definitely want to do that kind of thing, self-awareness. That could be the finding, right? Is that self-awareness is where it lives. It goes back to cultural proficiency when they always say inside, outside journey. And if you don't, you're not willing to look at yourself. You can't get anywhere else.

Esme: Yep. And in order for us to get somebody to reciprocate that vulnerability, they have to be in a place where they're open to evolving. If they're not self-aware or if they're not willing to acknowledge the behavior, they're not ready.

Elsie: Yeah, you're going to hit a brick wall or they're going to hit the brick wall.

Esme: And so it's like, but you can plant the seed.

Thymai: Maybe it's not courage. Maybe it's self- awareness.

Janice: Yes, I agree that it's not even courage. It's not hard. It's just being willing.

Esme: Yeah. And when you're self-aware then the assumption is that you're being honest with yourself. Right? So if you're truly self-aware, then you're going to be able to know those behaviors.

Elsie: Cause that's definitely the first step. That's a foundational, I mean courage comes with action, which would come later on maybe. But self-awareness...

When it comes to making assumptions about others who are racially or ethnically different from us, we found that a lack of self-awareness perpetuates the harm and division, whereas a strong sense of awareness could mitigate the harm by creating a space for reflecting on our actions or words, possibly transforming them from harmful behaviors to more vulnerable ones.

Conclusion: Paired Themes

The experiences of sharing our stories of vulnerability and the difficulty of vulnerability, of deeply looking within ourselves to express our innermost fears and collectively reflecting on the myriad of racist situations which surround us daily, ultimately exemplified how mutual vulnerability is needed to increase our feeling of connectedness with others. We can continue to be vulnerable and take the risks

ourselves, but if we are not able to critically reflect on ourselves, reconciling our feelings of inferiority and inadequacy no matter which side of the racial divide we sit, our prior experiences could unduly impact our ability to have meaningful cross-racial relationships, further perpetuating racial assumptions and misunderstandings, while upholding the long-standing institution of racism.

Individual Findings: Surprising Revelations

Because the research topic asked participants to explore individual and collective experiences of mutual vulnerability, it is necessary to identify what each co-inquirer discovered during her personal journey into vulnerability, human interconnectedness and cross-racial relationships.

Elsie

Elsie is a highly collaborative individual who is fiercely devoted to anti-racist work in her role as a White woman with privilege. Not only has she attended numerous training opportunities on cultural proficiency, she has co-presented and presented at many equity workshops. She was confident in her ability to participate in the study and express the degree of vulnerability needed to accomplish its purpose. Always looking to connect with others in more meaningful ways, and in spite of the anxiety which accompanied her in doing this work, Elsie enjoyed the experience of sharing the space with strong women from different races and ethnicities. She was drawn to the idea that we were seeking to increase feelings of human interconnectedness. Elsie shared that although she feels more fulfilled as a result of participating, she wished for more interconnectedness in the concluding meeting: "We did not explore that interconnected part or the commonality part, I wanted more of that, not a negative, but how I felt." We discussed that this may

have been due to it being a concluding meeting where we felt it was important to come to some final conclusion in the end. Wanting to feel connected to others and learn from others, Elsie was eager to know whether and how we will continue this work.

Esme

Although Esme was the youngest participant in the group, the cross-racial experiences that she willingly and vulnerably shared revealed a lifetime of challenges, which she had learned to navigate and overcome. She had the least amount of cultural proficiency training in the group, but had attended a few diversity workshops. In spite of this limited experience, she enjoyed exploring similar topics because it was a chance for her to learn and become more self-aware. I understood well that Esme was enthusiastic about diving into vulnerability because it was not a topic that she would normally contemplate otherwise. Unfamiliar or not, she was perfectly comfortable showing her vulnerable side and was not uncomfortable or afraid of the intense work. Esme shared that it was interesting for her to hear the perspectives of a White woman throughout the study. As a mixed-race female, she was surprised to see that Elsie was so aware of the inequities that she had encountered over the course of her life: "What one person said about acknowledging her privilege, that is rare, that is not something you hear people admit." Knowing that people like Elsie are indeed rare, Esme knows that she cannot assume that all people are aware that they are acting or being racist. She understood that she must learn to be patient and understanding and most importantly, pause before reacting.

Janice

Janice seemed to have the most experience when it comes to equity work. Such experiences though have shown her that people typically refrain from speaking their truths and consequently filter what they say when engaging in intergroup dialogues. For this reason, I was impressed that she wanted to participate in this study since it would also be an interracial environment. I hope it was the idea of expressing and exploring vulnerability that appealed to her. Whatever the reason, her voice as a Black female was not only welcomed but crucial. I was glad to see that she felt her voice and all other voices were well heard and well incorporated into the space that we created for our collaboration. Although already well-versed in cultural proficiency, Janice is a lifelong learner and saw potential in our collective work: "I want to grow, reflect and learn more about myself and my blind spots." She shared that the experience has helped her to interact with White people in a different way than she had before. One action stage in particular, the sentence stem activity, revealed to Janice that White people do not necessarily have the words to verbalize their thoughts even though their intention is to share openly and honestly. In terms of sharing with the other participants in the group, the experience of seeing that none of us held back, she also felt compelled to share in a different way than she had before. There was always a pressure that what she said had to be of value, but in this group, she did not feel that pressure and was able to share more freely and with more confidence.

Thymai

As the initiating researcher, I feel that I could not have chosen a better group of participants for this study. It is true that I would have liked for another one to two voices

to be present in our group. But that said, the voices that did come to the table and speak their truths were more than I could have asked for in terms of willingness to delve into a sensitive and delicate topic and be vulnerable at the same time. I knew that this kind of work was needed and envisioned it as being a very thrilling adventure. "Let's bring together four women from different races and ethnicities and see what happens!" I knew that I was going to learn from their engagement and participation, but I did not expect to uncover some truths about myself. Always in search of harmony, I was reticent to name as racist my cross-racial encounters where I experienced being slighted. To me, it was more of an entitlement issue. My co-inquirers helped me discover that White entitlement is the same as racism because of the privilege that is being exercised at the expense of another who is of a different race or ethnicity. I found this to be eye-opening on so many levels and am no longer going to dismiss other similar situations as mere entitlement and walk away from them. The fact that I used to do so explains another finding of mine. I discovered that I have behaved more passively than actively in this work that I have said is my life's work. Wanting to see the best in every human, I am not willing to call them out for behaviors that are clearly racist. In the spirit of human interconnectedness, I sometimes avoid confrontations, when if I had acted, the interactions could have been opportunities to be vulnerable and connect on a deeper level. This is an irony that has revealed itself to me and shown me how much work there is still to do for all of us on both sides of the racial divide.

Conclusion: Surprising Revelations

The surprises that we each discovered individually as a result of participating in this research inquiry were personal in nature, but will impact our interpersonal

relationships with cross-racial others. Elsie's hyper-sense of accountability will not prevent her from seeking out intergroup experiences where she can continue on her quest of deep interconnectedness. Janice's new found trust in collaborating with White people who are committed to anti-racist work will allow her to enter cross-racial situations with less skepticism. Esme's lesson learned around having more patience for White people will allow her to not make assumptions about them and their ability to understand or accept her cultural background. My own lesson learned around being more aware of my assumptions of White people will permit me to be less a victim in cross-racial situations and more of an advocate for cross-racial interconnectedness.

Overall Findings

The resulting themes, organized into six dyads, helped us to see the underlying outcomes of what we accomplished. Placing these dyads onto the fourfold way of knowing model revealed the needed progression from experiential to presentational to propositional and ultimately to practical knowledge. What we learned about risk-taking toward action and vulnerability describes our experiential knowledge. The range of vulnerable experiences that were shared during the study helped us co-construct our individual and collective presentational knowledge. This presentational knowledge was characterized by our awareness of self and interactions with others, as well as our lack of awareness and assumption of others, along with feelings of inferiority or inadequacy and a desire for empathic attunement. Institutional racism and White entitlement corresponded to propositional knowledge as we became able to assign concepts to what we shared based on our experiences. Prior experiences and storytelling were associated

with practical knowledge and the potential to change our narratives around how we express our vulnerability going forward with others across the racial divide.

What we discovered was grounded in our experience of vulnerability, and what we presented is a result of those experiences. The combination of our experiential and presentational knowledge influenced how we explained those experiences in propositional terms, leading to practical knowledge and what we need to aspire to as a new way of transforming those experiences. According to the surprises that we came across in our respective individual experiences, we each felt better positioned to move forward with such aspirations. If we are to use mutual vulnerability for increasing feelings of interconnectedness in cross-racial relationships, the following action is needed. As co-inquirers who have been transformed by participation in this study, we must continue to take risks and be vulnerable through the embracing of uncertainty and emotional exposure. We must be willing to look at ourselves with a self-awareness that helps us see how our actions and words can impact our interactions, especially if they lead to unfair assumptions. We will have to be able to overcome our own feelings of inferiority and inadequacy and find ways to be empathically attuned with others. And we cannot let any negative past experiences dictate how we will behave in future cross-racial situations so as to not contribute to the ongoing narrative of cross-racial misunderstandings.

Chapter Summary

The collective and individual engagement of five different ethnicities joining in community to explore mutual vulnerability across three research cycles, immersed in three intense action stages, resulted in the discovery of twelve informative and instructive

themes. The risk-taking and vulnerability, and in some cases lack of vulnerability, which underscored our experiences helped us realize that we need to be genuine with ourselves and open up to others if we are to have any hope of transforming our interpersonal interactions and relationships with racially different others. The degree to which we will be successful requires us to check our own assumptions, learning to be more patient and understanding. Even in situations steeping with entitlement and racism, we learned that giving in to feelings of inferiority or inadequacy and allowing negative past experiences to taint our hope, will hinder such progress. It is through self-awareness of our actions that will increase chances of being vulnerable, and more importantly, mutually vulnerable. The next chapter will connect our findings to our research question and sub-questions to see how well we achieved our shared research purpose.

VI. INTERPRETATION OF FINDINGS

The findings revealed insights that the participants and I thought responded to the research questions in part and in whole. In order to interpret these findings for their significance, and relate them to the literature, it is necessary to revisit both the topic of inquiry and the research question and sub-questions. The focus of this study was an exploration of mutual vulnerability in order to uncover and determine its potential for deepening feelings of human interconnectedness across diverse races and ethnicities. Once the co-inquirers became engaged in the research process, we collectively generated the following research question: How do we use vulnerability to explore and express our deep-rooted fears and mistrust in a way that draws out courage for the reciprocation of that vulnerability? We also generated the following sub-questions. What are those fears? What are commonalities in how we practice vulnerability? How can these commonalities help us move beyond our fears and increase our feelings of interconnectedness in cross-racial contexts?

Collective Findings: Addressing the Research Questions

How did we use vulnerability to explore and express our deep-rooted fears and mistrust in a way that draws out courage for the reciprocation of that vulnerability? The first step was creating the conditions for vulnerability to take place among strangers who represented different races and ethnicities. We did this by committing to a methodology which allowed each of us to feel empowered with regards to how the research study unfolded, and then collectively establishing the norms or agreements for how to interact vulnerably with each other. Once the conditions were in place, we collectively set about to identify the research actions, balancing action with reflection, that would elicit the

collective sharing of our individual vulnerable experiences. In essence, there were two dimensions to how vulnerability was enacted. We shared about our vulnerable experiences in the past, while engaging in vulnerable dialogue with each other throughout the study. The three strands that guided our collaborative human inquiry contributed to our ability to be courageous and reciprocate in kind as we each demonstrated vulnerability. As a reminder, they are 1) the inquiry strand, being able to understand and use the methodology; 2) the collaboration strand, having the capacity to contribute to the decision-making process; and 3) the interpersonal strand, being able to tend to our emotional states and accept any resulting tension as a potential source for growth and transformation. In addition, we did our best as co-inquirers to remain faithful to the collaborative human inquiry contract that we generated together during the initial meeting (See Appendix E). The agreements embedded in the contract, inspired by Singleton (2014), included staying engaged, speaking our truth, experiencing discomfort, and expecting and accepting non-closure.

Once we had created the conditions for vulnerability within the group and understood how to approach the research process, we needed to identify our first research action. For us, it made sense to share stories of when we were vulnerable and when we found it difficult to be vulnerable in a cross-racial context. This action allowed us to see the commonalities we shared regarding our demonstration of vulnerability with racially and ethnically diverse others. Additional commonalities, along with the fears and mistrust we had regarding our cross-racial interactions and relationships were divulged in the second research cycle and corresponding action of responding to sentence stems about being vulnerable across racial lines. During the final research cycle, the action of

sharing our personal experiences of racist situations exposed how we might move toward drawing out courage for us, and others, to move beyond our fears and increase our feelings of human interconnectedness. A description of the significance of these findings follows, accompanied by the individual findings that led to individual commitments, all leading to our overall findings.

What are Commonalities in How We Practiced Vulnerability?

The sharing of our individual experiences with vulnerability and the vulnerability we collectively displayed in engaging with each other revealed some commonalities regardless of our different race and ethnicity. These commonalities, which address part of the research questions, could be categorized into four paired themes: risk-taking and vulnerability, awareness of self and interaction with others, White entitlement and institutional racism, and prior experiences and storytelling.

Risk-Taking/Vulnerability. For this study, we used Brown's (2012) definition of vulnerability as "uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure" (p. 34). To be vulnerable then is to embrace uncertainty, to take risks, and to expose ourselves emotionally to others. Demonstrating vulnerability in this way can be challenging to do with people we know, inclusive of people who are of the same race and ethnicity. Trying to be vulnerable with strangers, inclusive of people from a different race or ethnic background, can seem impossible. For this reason, when recruiting for participants, one of the criteria required a willingness to explore vulnerability in the context of cross-racial and cross-ethnic relationships. I was fortunate to find three women who were willing to commit to the study's purpose. In sharing our stories of being vulnerable, we saw commonalities in how we practiced vulnerability in the cross-racial space. We took the risk to be brave,

even amidst the uncertainty of how others would respond, and chose to emotionally disclose our feelings to them. This gave each of us a sense of pride, regardless of whether the expression of vulnerability met with favorable outcomes. Being able to embrace our emotional vulnerability in this way confirms what scholars described in the literatures in terms of vulnerability being a resource, and not a weakness (Bailey, 2011; Finn, 2015; Gilson, 2011; Haugland, Lassen & Giske, 2018; Hinton, 2016; Rozmarin, 2017; Wu, 2013). Gilson (2011) saw vulnerability as potential: "Vulnerability is not just a condition that limits us, but also one that can enable us" (p. 310).

What was surprising in our experiences was that in spite of our personal conviction to be brave in these spaces, we were not always consistent in our ability to be vulnerable. Elsie found it difficult to be vulnerable when she had to conference with a Black male elementary student sent to the White principal's office for bad behavior. Esme was unable to be vulnerable when socializing with a group of White strangers who asked her about her ethnic background. Janice had a challenging time attempting to be vulnerable with administrators at her daughter's school discussing her academic performance. I was not willing to be vulnerable when engaging with a group of older White strangers who I knew were acting in a superior and entitled manner. Not only did we share common emotions during these situations such as anger and anxiety, but we shared a common motivation for not acting vulnerably. We were afraid to be rejected so we just chose not to engage authentically. Elsie was fearful "that I was going to do some crap, rejection," Esme reacted "out of fear of being treated or looked at differently," Janice "didn't see where it would be fruitful," and I used the excuse that "I just couldn't comprehend."

These reactions support the literature which concedes that although vulnerability can be "the birthplace of joy, creativity, belonging, love" (Brown, 2010), it can also be a risk that "involves embracing uncertainties, making amends with potential associated costs" (Hill, 2017, p. 438). In each of our respective stories of when it was difficult to be vulnerable, we were unable to reconcile the potential costs with the risk on our part of being vulnerable. Elsie was more afraid of saying the wrong thing to the student than she was willing to be vulnerable. Esme was more fearful that the family would judge her for being Arab than she was willing to be vulnerable. Janice was more upset that she felt helpless to help her daughter than she was willing to be vulnerable. And I was more comfortable being defensive than I was willing to be vulnerable. Fortunately, as we progressed through the research study, we saw that we need to learn how to take the risk and be vulnerable, even in spite of the uncertain outcomes.

With regards to our ability to be vulnerable with each other, trust played a role in making it possible for us to do so. That said, it is important to state that we dedicated an entire evening to getting to know each other and building relationships with one another to increase our "trust propensity", which refers to one's ability to rely on and trust others (Meyer et al., 2016). Our willingness and ability to share freely with each other aligns itself with the concept of sharing vulnerability (Ito & Bligh, 2017). These authors state that in order for individuals to share vulnerability, they must meet the conditions of possessing "humility, self-awareness, and the courage to acknowledge imperfections" (p. 66). After having spent four months together deeply immersed in such an intense topic, I can say with confidence that all co-inquirers in this study met those criteria.

The problem is that vulnerability on the part of one of the parties engaged in the cross-racial interaction or relationship does not suffice. It could be that this uncertainty of whether our attempts at vulnerability will be reciprocated or not influences our willingness to be vulnerable, consistently vulnerable, in any given cross-racial situation. The vulnerability must be reciprocated or else the cross-racial interaction or relationship will not thrive in terms of greater interconnectedness between the parties. "By meeting the humanity of the other person, they also experience reciprocity. They experience being vulnerable and recognize again their own vulnerability in the other person. As human beings, they discover they have more in common than what separates them" (Haugland et al., 2017, p. 68). Within our inquiry group, we saw that in shedding light on our commonalities, we were able to increase our feelings of human interconnectedness with one another. During my last interview with Elsie, she shared her feelings about our last session, which felt rushed to all of us because we were running out of time.

> That, for some reason, in the last session I felt like, "Okay. This is the last session," and there's a little bit of that. And then I felt like we didn't explore that interconnectedness part. More of the commonality part for... I wanted more of that. I don't know if that's a negative, but that's the way I felt in there.

This perspective comes from the only White woman in the group, someone who shared having anxiety being in the group because she knew she was held more accountable than the others. Her statement indicates that the connection she felt with her fellow co-inquirers made the risk-taking worth the risk.

In his article on theorising care work in adult education, John (2016) helps us make the link between vulnerably exposing our emotions and linking vulnerability to

connectedness. “Emotions build trust and solidarity which foster sharing, dialogue and action and declare our fundamental interconnectedness as humans” (p. 348).

Awareness of Self/Interaction with Others. As co-inquirers in the study, we each demonstrated an awareness of self and an awareness of how our own behaviors influenced our relationships as we attempted to be vulnerable across racial lines. Ito and Bligh (2017) describe the act of sharing vulnerability as “an exercise of retrospection and self-awareness that requires individuals to turn an objective eye on their own behaviors” (p. 68). By agreeing to participate in the study, we were making the commitment to critically look at and acknowledge our behaviors when it came to being vulnerable in cross-racial spaces. This included holding ourselves accountable for how those behaviors could hinder our ability to meaningfully and authentically interact with those who are racially or ethnically different from us. “To be honest and open means to accept responsibility and expose one’s own mistakes or weaknesses, in other words, to show vulnerability” (Meyer et al., 2016, p. 222). The accepting of one’s fallibility in this way is what Meyer et al. call epistemic vulnerability. Our common quality of self-awareness in looking at our own weaknesses manifested itself during the second research action when we responded to the sentence stems. Engaging in this action where each sentence stem began with or contained, “When I’m vulnerable across racial lines, …” allowed us to examine our behaviors with cross-racial others in general, or in specific situations such as in the stories that we shared during the first research cycle.

In the stories where we could not be vulnerable or found it difficult to be vulnerable, the reason is because we were being skeptical of those we encountered in the cross-racial context. We were not aware of it at the time, but our willingness to engage in

this action of critically looking at ourselves and how we interact with others across racial lines made us more self-aware. For Elsie, she was able to admit that she thinks others may perceive her as "a silly, blonde White woman who can't see beyond Whiteness." For Esme, she admitted assuming that others will automatically think "that I'm out of place" so she does not give them a chance. For Janice, she stated that she believed others perceived her in the following way, "that I can't add value, that I'm unintelligent, and that my responses are easily dismissed." For me, I confessed thinking that others only see me as being "smart and that I don't have any difficulties or challenges." Although in the literature Uitto et al. (2016) stated that "engaging in a dialog about one's deeply held normative beliefs may in itself feel threatening" (p. 15), I do not believe that any of the co-inquirers felt threatened as we discussed our experiences of when it was challenging to be vulnerable and how this was attributed to our skepticism toward others. We did not notice any defensive routines (Argyris, 1990) and nobody in the group became angry, which was because we came into the space wanting to collaborate with others to bring about our own blind spots and because we knew we had responded to each sentence stem with the utmost honesty. We spoke our truths even if that meant having to look at our own role in how we ourselves hinder the possibility for greater connectedness through mutual vulnerability.

Perhaps the reason that none of the co-inquirers felt threatened is owing to the use of the collaborative human inquiry as the methodology. This research action, which we agreed demanded the greatest degree of vulnerability, also required us to navigate the interpersonal strand. We had to remind ourselves that however we were feeling as a result of participating in any of the research actions, especially in the case of disorienting

emotions, that the experience would help us to grow and transform (Heron, 1996). This reminder helped us to remain self-aware without feeling criticized by others and accept our role in hindering or advancing the possibility for human interconnectedness with those who are racially or ethnically different. The decision to escalate our research action from one of sharing stories to one of responding to direct sentence prompts regarding how we interact vulnerably across racial lines seems similar to what Brown (2010) called "excruciating vulnerability", referring to the need for ourselves to be really seen for connections to happen. The motivation for which we chose such an intense action during the second research cycle stemmed from our individual and collective desire to really address and dig into the topic. Engaging in this action meant that we could not avoid being truly seen by each other as we had to finish each sentence stem with honesty and openness. A by-product of the action was that our connections to one another were significantly increased as we learned to be excruciatingly vulnerable with one another. The excruciating nature of this action was due to one of the sentence stems in particular which required us to speak to what makes us each racist. As we responded, we realized that we each had a role in sustaining racism in our own personal lives.

For the sentence stem, "When I'm vulnerable across racial lines, what's racist in me is…", following is how each co-inquirer responded.

Elsie: "When I'm vulnerable across racial lines, what's racist in me is everything that continues to leave the layers unpeeled or else I sit in it."

Esme: "When I'm vulnerable across racial lines, what's racist in me is feeling uncomfortable when I'm the darkest person in the room in social settings, or just out and about, and I tend to feel more comfortable when my husband's with me."

Janice: "When I'm vulnerable across racial lines, what's racist in me is that I feel that my contribution has to measure up against the White standard, and when other people of color speak, I'm afraid that they're going to say something that devalues us, in the eyes of other White people."

Thymai: "When I'm vulnerable across racial lines, what's racist in me is when I'm in a room with other people of color, I feel at ease; when I'm in a room with only White people, I'm making a lot of assumptions about how they perceive me because of my fear of feeling inferior to them."

As excruciating as this action was, we were able to proceed because we knew that exposing ourselves in this way would increase our understanding of one another, and hopefully contribute to the purpose of this study. Again, I believe that the strands of the collaborative human inquiry and how we each navigated them in support of one another allowed us individually to maintain a level of self-awareness throughout the study that helped us remain accountable and responsible in a non-threatening manner no matter how risky the research action. The importance of self-awareness is highlighted in Pettigrew's (1998) contributions on necessary conditions for cross-group friendships to thrive. He outlined four interrelated components as necessary: "Learning about the outgroup, changing behavior, generating affective ties, and ingroup reappraisal" (Pettigrew, 1998, p. 80). If we agree that vulnerability is an act of self-awareness (Ito & Bligh, 2017), then the possibility for meaningful cross-racial relationships is dependent upon our ability to be vulnerable, which includes evaluating who we are, how we behave, and what we believe.

White Entitlement/Institutional Racism. The ways in which we as co-inquirers practiced vulnerability through participation in three research cycles and three corresponding inquiry actions uncovered common terminology alluding to a sense of White entitlement and the persistence of institutional racism in our individual and collective experiences related to vulnerability in the cross-racial context. Examples of the words and phrases that emerged in our reflection following the first action of sharing stories of vulnerability included White entitlement, White bubble, institutional racism, racial fatigue, and naming racism. During our second research action, we saw these additional words surface such as dismantling Whiteness, dominant culture, inequitable power dynamics, White privilege, and the White standard. For the third research action, the sharing of racist scenarios that we witnessed or experienced did not uncover actual terms because they were examples of White entitlement and institutional racism. Rather than merely define these terms, I would like to address the findings associated with some of these words and situate them in the literature concerning cross-racial relationships in order to examine their significance.

During the reflection stage of the first research cycle, after we shared our stories of vulnerability, much of our conversation centered on the notion of the White bubble and the need to name racism. In the former case, it was Elsie who instructed the other co-inquirers on what it meant to live in a White bubble. Elsie, remarkably and fully aware of her White privilege, did not have any trouble explaining the concept as she described Esme's husband:

> The White bubble is that you create it in this environment that protects you from ever thinking about the conversation that you had with your husband. He never

> had to think about it because his whole life has been in this bubble where he didn't have to think about it.

To put it into context, Esme's story of being vulnerable was when she confronted her White husband about an insensitive comment he made in claiming that he knew more about the Arab culture than she did. Elsie continued:

> So that's where I hear people say things like, "I'm not racist." White people who say, "I'm not racist." But what they're really saying is, "I lived in a White bubble and I don't dislike people of color." That's what they're really trying to say. Whereas this person over here chooses to not like people of color, and I'm not them, so I'm not racist, not understanding the big picture that by the whole foot of oppression, the cultural everything White people are obviously racist. But it's pretty hard to say in a group of White people.

What is significant about her perspective is not just in her ability to unpack her White privilege to the other co-inquirers so early and so vulnerably in the study but the effect that her remarks had on us as people of color. Esme, Janice, and I have been transformed by Elsie's contributions to the inquiry in terms of her ability to openly discuss racism while simultaneously holding herself accountable as the only White woman in the group with such courage and compassion. By the end of the study, it is clear that genuine friendships were established that crossed the racial divide within our inquiry group.

The formation of these cross-racial friendships align with what scholars have stated regarding the crucial need of directly acknowledging and addressing racism as a precursory step to forming meaningful interracial relationships (Okech & Champe, 2008; Rawlins, 2009; Thomas, 1993). In a study by Thomas (1993) where he examined how

the nature of cross-racial relationships are influenced by how people deal with issues of race, he discovered that parties who "held mutually supportive, complementary views of race relations" shared the same strategy of directly engaging with issues relating to race. Aligned with Elsie's comment that White people are racist, certain scholars proposed that for anyone wishing to establish a cross-racial friendship, the first step is to consider everyone as having the potential for being racist and that racism should be understood as a relational driver (Rawlins, 2009; Smith and Nickerson, 1986). Rawlins (2009) added that for cross-racial friendships to flourish, social conditions must be present for diverse people to meet and interact, and there has to be opportunity to develop shared meanings based on interactions that carry emotional significance for both parties. Considering the conditions under which the co-inquirers came together, the stage was most definitely set for them to interact by way of participation in activities that required them to be vulnerable, to emotionally expose themselves. However, Okech and Champe (2008) posited that prolonged engagement is a requisite for cross-racial relationships to thrive. It remains to be seen whether the friendships within our group will indeed be sustained, but a promise was made that we would not let the interconnectedness we established fall to the wayside upon completion of the study.

In the latter case concerning the need to name racism, it was Janice who educated me that I must not shy away from calling it racism if that is what it feels like. She was referring to both of my vulnerability stories where the common denominator was me wondering whether they were about race or about entitlement. Janice expressed:

> The minute you think it's about race, it's about race. Naming it. To me you name it. You call it what it is. We don't want to call it that, it's like the doubt, this maybe I'm just, and it's race.

Esme contributed as well:

> And that's not just saying the word racism or that it had anything to do with racism, but calling it what it is I think we were all very clear on what the situation was. I think that it ties back into the self-awareness, knowing I know what's going on here. And sometimes I think with you Thymai, maybe not wanting it to be about race, but knowing that it did have something to do with that.

I admit that it was difficult to hear these words because I had always felt proud of my ability to be self-aware of how I interacted with all people, not just with those who are racially or ethnically different. It was not until the second research cycle of completing the sentence stems that I was able to come to terms with their terms. My assertion in the early stages of the study that the situations I encountered had more to do with a sense of entitlement than with race would not have permitted me to engage authentically in the study had I not been willing to examine my beliefs. Acknowledging the presence of race as a potentially divisive factor is indeed a precursory step to developing meaningful cross-racial friendships. It required me to remember that institutional racism is pervasive and that it positions members from different races and ethnicities quite differently (Rawlins, 2009). I definitely felt positioned differently from my White counterparts with whom I engaged in both of my stories. Even though I am not seeking friendships with these individuals, acknowledging that racism was at the core of those encounters can help

me in future interactions using the skills I learned during this study to act more vulnerably and authentically when engaging with racially different others.

One concept I would like to highlight from the literature pertaining to possibilities for cross-racial relationships and friendships and connecting it to what we accomplished is what Park (2012) introduced as two opposing processes, ethnic transcendence and ethnic reinforcement. Ethnic transcendence refers to members of the out-group being incorporated or assimilated into a larger common group that has no associations with race. Ethnic reinforcement on the other hand is characterized by members from different races and ethnicities coming together but with an appreciation for their diversity. In this case, their race or ethnicity is celebrated and maximized rather than extinguished within the larger collective group. The use of collaborative human inquiry as the methodology for our study promoted ethnic reinforcement.

Not only were we each forced to problematize race in our inquiry, but race was the criteria for which we each were valued for our contributions. Our racial identity was instrumental in the research design. Identity surfaced in the literature as a crucial component that must be considered when seeking out cross-racial relationships (Park, 2012; Rawlins, 2009). Rawlins (2009) captured the need for our identity to be sustained best, "for authentic friendship we all must retain our self-recognizing identities (p. 152). The perspectives and the racial identities of a Black woman, a White woman, a mixed racial woman and an Asian woman were woven together, with each identity held intact, to construct knowledge around how to increase our feelings of human interconnectedness through the enactment of mutual vulnerability, and thereby combatting White entitlement and institutional racism. So even though our practices of vulnerability and non-

vulnerability uncovered a common pattern of inequitable race dynamics, we felt empowered in that our racial identities were welcomed, sustained, and needed throughout the study. This feeling of empowerment propelled us to move forward and remain committed, in spite of any negative prior cross-racial experiences.

Prior Experiences/Storytelling. For all of us, our ability to be vulnerable in the stories we shared was dependent upon the perception we had of how others might react due to what we had experienced in the past. From her prior experiences, Esme knew that people's behavior changed when they discovered her Arab origins so she kept this part of her identity to herself rather than risk speaking her truth. Janice, hyper-aware that she is Black, became reticent in expressing her vulnerability when dealing with cross-racial interactions because she never saw favorable outcomes when she was vulnerable. Elsie, typically hyper-aware that she is White, was afraid to be vulnerable because she knew that she could inadvertently offend someone even in her well-intentioned efforts. Historically, I have been afraid to be vulnerable because I have always let a fear of being inferior dictate whether my vulnerability would be well received. These experiences underscored a resignation that was based on the perception that others lacked the empathy or the will to understand if we tried to engage with them vulnerably. As a result, we chose not to do so.

According to the literature, our inability to act vulnerably may be due to race-based rejection sensitivity or racial battle fatigue. According to the race-based rejection sensitivity framework, people who have been historically marginalized or discriminated against still seek acceptance (Page-Gould et al., 2014). However, as a result of these prior experiences of discrimination, "people develop anxious expectations that they will

be similarly socially rejected in future situations" (p. 358). Although a fear of rejection can lead to negative reactions such as stress and anxiety, the benefits of persisting at efforts to meaningfully engage with cross-racial others can also lead to positive outcomes such as perspective-taking or empathy (Park, 2012). The ways in which we interacted with each other within the inquiry group support the literature in this regard. Listening to each other's perspectives provided a rich source of knowledge that helped elevate our own thinking. As we shared our stories, finished our own sentences, and offered our personal examples of racist scenarios, it was easy to empathize with one another. Racial battle fatigue is defined as the stress that persons of color undergo when they are isolated within a majority group environment (Park, 2012). This racial battle fatigue can literally be exhausting and cause individuals to not want to make an effort to engage with White people who do not seem genuine in their "interracial relating" (p. 586). There is hope however. Just as having negative racial experiences might negatively impact participation in cross-racial relationships, individuals who have had positive racial encounters are more willing to seek out and engage in cross-racial friendships (Okech & Champe, 2008; Park, 2012). This is the case with our group of co-inquirers.

If we contrast the stories of when we found it difficult to be vulnerable with those of when we were able to be vulnerable, we can see that vulnerability is a choice. We can make the choice to engage vulnerably with cross-racial others and increase our sense of connectedness with them. Despite our prior experiences where we chose not to, each co-inquirer learned as a result of the study that we must find a way to put aside our fears that we might be rejected and our perceptions that our efforts at vulnerability will not be reciprocated. The literature informs us that vulnerability is an act of self-awareness

whereby individuals must be willing to look inward (Ito & Bligh, 2017). The choice to be vulnerable then must be preceded by a choice to be self-aware. The ability to be vulnerable was a conscious decision that we each made in the moment of each research cycle. Although human beings come into this world as "fragile and exposed creatures" (D'Agnese, 2017, p. 100), vulnerability doesn't have to be passive. Instead, we can recognize that we possess the agency to transform our state of being into something more productive. Each participant came to the study willing to look inside of ourselves and examine long held beliefs about how we interacted with racially different others. The findings show how our capacity for awareness of self can and did influence our ability to be vulnerable and respond vulnerably to others. "Vulnerability designates neither positive nor negative states of being or forms of relationality but contains the capacity for either or both" (Petherbridge, 2016, p. 591). Brown (2012) suggests that we can reframe our perceived vulnerability, our perceived risk or exposure, by realizing that we have agency in managing it in such a way that leads to positive outcomes. We are vulnerable, but we can manage it to our advantage.

The findings contribute to the literature that vulnerability is not a weakness, but that it can be leveraged as a strength. Because humans have the agency to manage their vulnerability in a way that allows for positive outcomes to result, we ultimately chose to not passively accept our position in this world as fragile subjects. Rather, we found that we can use our capacity to act, to make a choice to be vulnerable knowing that it is "the core, the heart, the center, of meaningful human experiences" (Brown, 2012, p. 12). The result is that we experienced a level of interconnectedness that each of us valued as a

benefit of having engaged in the study. In fact, by the end of the study, we each expressed a desire for more of this human interconnectedness.

With regards to how we practiced vulnerability in our collective space, the degree with which each co-inquirer, myself included, demonstrated vulnerability seemed to be commensurate. Each of our efforts to engage vulnerably in the collective space was matched and reciprocated. The only conceivable difference was reflected in how our stories were depicted during the first research cycle. Some of us chose to use the "full range of human sensibilities" (Heron, p. 1996) to help tell our personal stories while others did not pursue a more creative route for expression. I do not believe however that this choice was due to a lack of comfort or security in sharing their narrative, but better attributed to a love of and penchant for creativity. I do believe that the space we created and the stage we set through our development of norms and the multitude of relationship- and trust-building activities established the conditions for vulnerability not only to be welcomed, but expected as a non-negotiable, and caused all participants to come to this study with a willingness and even an eagerness to do so. The use of storytelling is revered in the literature as being a vehicle through which our respective subjectivities can be understood on both sides of the racial divide. When stories are shared between diverse individuals, there is possibility for greater understanding, leading to a cooperative and constructive environment (Rawlins, 2009). It is through the sharing of our personal stories, both formally as part of the first research cycle and informally during the second and third inquiry cycles, that commonalities within our group surfaced, helping us to relate to and better understand one another's practices of vulnerability in the cross-racial space.

Our inquiry group of dedicated women, willing to go the extra mile to achieve the purpose of the study, during the first research meeting had already felt such a community with each other that we were committed to supporting each other like we would expect our families to do. Despite the sense of aforementioned resignation that on occasion characterized our prior experiences and which placed a shadow on how optimistic we felt we could be when it came to this kind of work, the prospect of this study fueled our enthusiasm, and we did not hold back. Each of us gave everything we had emotionally to this study so that we could change our cross-racial relationships and construct new narratives moving forward. In order to do this, we knew we had to address our fears and mistrust when it comes to being vulnerable in the cross-racial context.

What are our Deep-Rooted Fears and Mistrust?

Upon completing the first research cycle of which the action stage consisted of the dual sharing of stories of being vulnerable and the difficulty of being vulnerable, the co-inquirers seemed to be eager for something more risky than storytelling in the traditional sense. As we were immersed in the pre-reflection stage contemplating our next action, we each were given time to consider what we had discovered during the first research action, how well it answered the research questions, what still needed to be answered, and what action might lead us to those answers. Once sufficient time had passed to individually reflect and brainstorm ideas for the second research action, we discussed our ideas as a group. Janice was the first participant willing to share her ideas:

> So I was reading the activities, and they just don't seem vulnerable to me. They seem super safe. They seem like we can stay in our head space and never have to

> delve deep. Like none of this would make me uncomfortable. So I feel like they're not edgy enough.
>
> And to be vulnerable to me, you have to be willing to be edgy. And you have to be okay with being... What's the word? What's the opposite of PC? The opposite of PC?

I replied with the suggestion, "Real." But this is not what Janice had in mind. She elaborated her thinking:

> But beyond that. But putting out there what's out there, and not leaving the hard stuff untouched. So I think we have to be willing to discuss our own shortfalls and our own shortcomings and reveal our own fears and our own unfinished work and our real actual experiences, our real actual thoughts, our real examples, and how those have and are playing out. And not necessarily searching for an easy solution, but just to put it in the air.

Before you knew it, we were all on board and came to a consensus that we needed a more "uncomfortable" and less "safe" research action that would address our deepest fears and mistrust when it came to being vulnerable across racial lines. Once the suggestion of using sentence stems to elicit the responses was accepted by the group, we set forth in collectively writing the ten prompts, plus one regarding our commitment that was repeated at the start and at the end. What was revealed during the action stage was a finding that gave us pause. What we found was that our fears and mistrust were centered around a feeling of inferiority and inadequacy.

Inferiority/Inadequacy. The way that inferiority and inadequacy surfaced during our second research action was so poignant and full of emotion that it physically

felt like layers were being peeled away, and we were completely exposed to one another. In fact, with each sentence stem response uncovered, our individual and collective breaths seemed to sound heavier and longer. But we persisted to find that this pervasive sense of inferiority or inadequacy was not only placed on us by others, but by ourselves. This raised our self-awareness to another level. Among the sentence stems, there were three in particular that addressed our fears pertaining to how we engaged vulnerably across racial lines. As a reminder of these findings related to the theme of inferiority and inadequacy, the table below shows how each co-inquirer responded to each of those questions and will help advance our discussion regarding the fear of being inferior or inadequate and how it is situated in the existing literature in the context of cross-racial relationships.

Table 2. Sentence Stem Responses Regarding Fear.

When I'm vulnerable across racial lines,				
	Thymai	Janice	Elsie	Esme
I'm afraid of…	falling apart, seeming weak, and confirming their opinion that I'm inferior	the information, feelings, thoughts, fears that I share will be weaponized and used against me	saying something stupid without realizing it, and hurting someone	being dismissed
My own fear about …(insert race) is …	White people, is that I will never be good enough to be considered their equal	White people, is that they're not interested in sharing power	people of color, is that they're done with me and don't see value or potential in working together	my own race, Mexican and Arab, is that I'm less than for not being exactly what I'm supposed to be; and my own fear about the White race is that I also don't fit perceived standards of how I should be

Table 2. Continued

Who or what frightens me is…	because I don't look like the dominant culture, because I wasn't born here, that I'll never be accepted, I'll never feel I have the right to be here in this country, and I'll always have to try to prove myself, that I do deserve to be here	who frightens me, are people who are silent, because I fear that again, that my vulnerability will be weaponized and used to harm me, and that they are not invested, or there's no urgency to change the status quo	what frightens me the most, is that it's the dim future for our next generation without some kind of change	what frightens me is being devalued and dismissed, and like, what I bring to the table doesn't hold as much weight

The theme of inferiority and inadequacy supports the literature on cross-racial friendships (Okech & Champe, 2008; Williams & Eberhardt, 2008). In their article on cultural competence within the counseling profession, Okech and Champe (2008) sought to advocate for cross-racial friendships as a means for increasing counselor competence and their ability to openly discuss racism. During their initial discussion, they first problematize the racial biases held by White individuals stemming from a long history of racism and segregation. To illustrate the viewpoint of inferiority, they introduced the concept of aversive racism. "Such aversive racism may manifest itself through a White friend's need to speak on behalf of their friend who is a person of color, thus revealing the White friend's assumptions about the individual's social status, intelligence, interpersonal skills, or ability to handle adversity" (p. 109). This existence of White superiority is what contributed to the responses that we see in the table above. Williams and Eberhardt (2008) offer the concept of "biological essentialism" (p. 1033), which is the belief that race is a biological construct rather than a social construct. Those who

believe in this notion also believe that other races not of the dominant race are biologically inferior to them, which removes any motivation to develop relationships with them.

While the existence of White superiority in our lives made each of us feel vulnerable to being perceived as inferior or inadequate, what is powerful is that Elsie also shared fears of being perceived as "stupid" and that people are "done with me." It was both impactful and painful to hear her openly share this feeling because it made us realize that it is not only the dominant majority group who has the power to make others in the minority group feel less than, but that these biases reside on both sides of the racial and ethnic divide. In a study conducted by Shelton and Richardson (2005) where they examined motivations of in-group and out-group members, they discovered that "Whites and Blacks both held attributional biases about the other that, unless corrected, result in continued avoidance of contact" (as cited by Okech & Champe, 2008, p. 106). Because the social distance gap is largest between Whites and Blacks (Odell et al., 2005; Perry, 2013), the perspectives shared by Elsie and Janice and how they evolved over the course of our study deserve to be further illuminated, and I will do so later in this chapter. For now, it is important to note the significance of their contributions to the discussion around what it means to be vulnerable when engaging with those who are racially different from us.

The other significance to these findings is rooted in the pure vulnerability that was on display as we each confronted our innermost thoughts, attitudes, and beliefs in the presence of one another. It could not have been easy for Elsie, hyper-aware of her accountability, to share that her fear concerning people of color, "is that they're done

with me and don't see value or potential in working together." It was not easy for me to admit to myself, let alone in front of others, that I live with the fear of always having "to try and prove myself." It was difficult for Janice to divulge in front of a White person that she fears what she shares "will be weaponized and used against me." Esme was vulnerable in her response regarding the fear associated with her mixed heritage that "my own race, Mexican and Arab, is that I'm less than for not being exactly what I'm supposed to be." These are findings that are not found in the literature but are powerful in suggesting that by creating the conditions for mutual vulnerability to occur, people in cross-racial relationships can produce such riveting confessions as ours in terms of their own motivations about interacting with racially and ethnically diverse others. The literature discusses how racial mistrust "minimizes cross-racial contact, which makes it difficult for individuals to have experiences that lead to friendship" (Okech & Champe, 2008) and that "a biological conception of race may reduce the sense of connectedness – of shared humanity that crosses racial lines and makes out-group members worthy of attention" (Williams & Eberhardt, 2008). But there is limited evidence in the scholarship that speaks to the need for mutual vulnerability as a vital ingredient in the battle against our racial misunderstandings, hate, and violence.

Since a lack of closeness and social reciprocity is problematized within intergroup relations, we must look for opportunities where mutual efforts of openness, connection, intimacy and trust can occur across races and ethnicities (Okech & Champe, 2008; Williams & Johnson, 2011). Vulnerability and mutual vulnerability can be one option. Some scholars might argue that those who have been historically marginalized and made to feel inferior and inadequate are already vulnerable (Cole, 2016; Holland, 2018).

Although Petherbridge (2016) agrees with this traditional conceptualization of vulnerability, she claimed that vulnerability has an ambivalent nature in that "it evokes not only mortality, injury, and violence, but also love, desire, agency and interdependence" (p. 594). For her, denying the generative quality of vulnerability would be "a denial of our constitution in the context of relations with others" (p. 598). Instead she proposed that we "recognize our reciprocal vulnerability, our constitutive and needful openness to others" (p. 598). Within our cross-racial group, our deepest feelings were laid bare in front of each other as we were fully immersed in this intense research action and confessed our innermost fears of being devalued or dismissed, potentially harmed, and of never being accepted. We accepted our "situational vulnerability" (Rogers & Lange, 2013) before others, and we made the choice, individually and collectively, to share these fears to see how they can help us move forward by embracing our "constitutive vulnerability" (Petherbridge, 2016, p. 596), which indicates that we need others.

As co-inquirers we discovered that this feeling of inferiority and inadequacy can exist on both sides of the racial and ethnic divide. The literature on human interconnectedness informs us that we need others (Barrett-Lennard, 2007;; Dinkins, 2017; Linklater, 2009, 2010; Lu, Dane & Gellman, 2005; Montero & Colman, 2000; Ventres, Dharamsi & Ferrer, 2017). The next research question I address is how we can enact vulnerability to move beyond our fears of inferiority and inadequacy in order to increase our feelings of human interconnectedness with cross-racial others?

How Do We Draw Out Courage for Mutual Vulnerability?

The overarching research question which was written and agreed upon by the inquiry group is "How do we use vulnerability to explore and express our deep-rooted fears and mistrust in a way that draws out courage for the reciprocation of that vulnerability?" Our findings which addressed the last segment of the research question revealed two ways in which we can create opportunities for mutual vulnerability. What our findings did not address in full was the concept of courage or how to draw out courage. Instead, we discovered what might better bring about mutual vulnerability are learning how to be empathically attuned to one another and how to address our lack of self-awareness when interacting with others to avoid making assumptions. The following section will elaborate on each of these possibilities and their potential for generating mutual vulnerability in the cross-racial context.

Empathic Attunement. The theme of empathic attunement was consistent with what I ascertained from the literature on human interconnectedness. In his framework of transnational solidarity, Linklater (2010) argued for a new kind of human interconnectedness in which strangers are empathically attuned to each other. This ethical framework instructs us to find ways of emotionally identifying with one another for the sake of the future of humanity. Empathic attunement, according to Lu, Dane and Gellman (2005), is "a different kind of human connectedness with the other" (p. 89). Social workers who participated in their research project learned the technique of emptying, contemplation and being present. They were taught how to release past attachments, how to become aware of their selves as connected to others, and how to be present in the moment in order to authentically engage with others. Empathic attunement

is a necessary component toward greater human interconnectedness if we want to evolve as global citizens (Linklater, 2009, 2010).

The participants revealed in their sharing of themselves this same desire for connection with others in the cross-racial context, demonstrated in the findings based on our responses to the following sentence stems from "When I'm vulnerable across racial lines, I want the other person to…" and "When I'm vulnerable across racial lines, I want the other person to…so that I don't feel othered." We want cross-racial others to put themselves in our shoes, to see us as they see themselves. In this manner, othering can be viewed as a positive phenomenon as reflected in the work of Levinas (1969) who posits that that "we find our own self reflected in the face of the Other" (as cited by Dinkins, 2017, p. 15). Instead of othering making us feel inferior and inadequate, this view of othering is essential to our sense of self. If we truly seek to understand ourselves, we have to find ways to relate to and understand others. We see once more the concept of reciprocity and the need for mutual vulnerability as opposed to vulnerability that is one-sided and not reciprocated.

In the social work research project mentioned above and conducted by Lu, Dane and Gellman (2005), the technique they used of emptying, contemplation and being present carries potential for opening the door to mutual vulnerability. If we consider what we accomplished within our inquiry group, I believe that the four of us learned how to be empathically attuned with one another. As part of the collaborative human inquiry process, we developed special inquiry skills that were similar to these techniques such as being present, emotional competence, and bracketing (Heron, 1996). Being present meant we had to learn to act with empathy as we engaged in the research actions and

tuned in to the experiences of our fellow inquirers. To show emotional competence, we each had to learn how to manage our emotions in a positive way that supported our individual well-being and the collective well-being of the group. The last skill of bracketing was new for my fellow co-inquirers, but we all did our best to be aware of any perceptions that might have hindered us from authentic dialogue and authentic collaboration. During the last interviews with the participants, they each shared their overall experience from engaging in the study.

> Elsie: Well, the positive changes. Whenever I work in a cross cultural group or I feel more fulfilled and especially being able to relate and connect. Other than you, I didn't know the other two, so it really was walking into a group where two of the people I didn't know at all. And I feel connected to them and that I've learned from them and I'm richer listening to them and learning from them.
>
> Esme: Although uncomfortable, it's a safe environment. And so I feel like this exploration has been really eye-opening. And I would hope that anyone would have that safe place and those safe people in their lives where they can express themselves like that. But I mean, we know that's not reality for most. So it's a really unique experience to be able to do this and speak openly about things that are not comfortable or not pretty.
>
> Janice: I think I appreciate the process itself. The fact that each of our voices genuinely, for real, are incorporated and included. It's such a weird experience being in a room with four completely different racial groups represented and sharing this experience. It's been very powerful and different. I hope that we will

delve even deeper and I hope that the connections that we've made won't dissolve just because the study is...

These descriptions indicate that we were able to be empathically attuned to one another, but in our final meeting, when discussing empathic attunement in the larger society, we felt that there was a precursory step that was needed. We believe that empathic attunement with another can be a way to use our commonalities to help us move beyond our fears and increase our feelings of interconnectedness in cross-racial contexts, but we felt that before it could be considered a feasible or achievable state for interacting with others who are racially or ethnically different from us, there was a pressing need for self-awareness and an understanding that a lack thereof can lead to unfair and unjust assumptions about those who are racially and ethnically diverse.

Lack of Self-Awareness/Assumptions About Others. In order to use vulnerability to explore and express our deep-rooted fears and mistrust in a way that draws out courage for the reciprocation of that vulnerability, each participant had to engage vulnerably across three agreed upon research actions. We learned that in order to do this successfully, each participant had to possess a level of self-awareness.

Vulnerability is an act of "self-awareness that requires individuals to turn an objective eye on their own behaviors" (Ito & Bligh, 2017, p. 68). If this is true, then an individual who is not willing to look inward and objectively at their own actions cannot be self-aware and thus cannot engage in vulnerable acts. In the case of the participants in this study, this holds true. I found that we each displayed an extreme willingness to examine our long-held beliefs in order to learn more about and better ourselves. We exhibited a self-awareness that allowed us to come to the space with very little fear of

risk or emotional exposure. If fear was present, which it was at certain moments of the study, we found a way to persist through our self-awareness.

Having a lack of self-awareness can lead to racist situations such as the ones shared during our last research action. Through the voicing of situations in which we each had personally experienced or witnessed racism, we saw that racism pervades all aspects of our lives, and our fears of inferiority and inadequacy exist because of its pervasiveness. Incidents shared by the participants included examples of racism, possibly unconscious, and contained elements showing persons of color as being inferior. Esme provided the example of a Latina step-mother who was mistaken for the nanny when picking up her White step-son from school. Elsie shared an example which occurred at her job site where she often does business with a certain bank who never asks *her* questions, but who calls for confirmation when she sends a co-worker who is a person of color. These examples of racism exist because of a lack of self-awareness. Plummer et al. (2016) conducted a study where they examined cross-racial friendship patterns among adults through the use of survey data and focus groups with Black and White participants. Their findings uncovered that cross-racial friends reported lower levels of trust and intimacy than same-race friends. They rationalize this as being due to less overt forms of racism, such as unconscious bias, that render racism invisible and more challenging to measure. According to Bonilla-Silva (2003) this is "racism without racists" and emphasizes the problem of not being aware of our privilege, namely White privilege (as cited in Plummer et al., 2016, p. 491). The need to manage our unconscious bias supports our findings that a lack of self-awareness can lead individuals to make unjust assumptions about diverse others, jeopardizing the opportunity for meaningful, and

authentic, cross-group contact, relationships, and friendships. Although the outcomes of the study do not seem to provide much hope, the authors do conclude by stating that more research is needed around how to remove barriers to cross-racial friendships and how to nurture them once established. Our study contributes to the literature by providing one avenue by which we can remove these barriers of hidden racial biases. We can make them visible by engaging in acts of self-awareness, which fosters the opportunity for mutual vulnerability within cross-racial relationships. Although I did not ask participants to compare our newly formed cross-racial friendships to their relationships with same-race others, our research findings demonstrated that high levels of trust and intimacy are indeed possible between cross-racial friends.

We can recall from the literature that "biological essentialism" reinforces the White dominant group as the in-group and all others as the out-group (Williams & Eberhardt, 2008). Those who adhere to this concept view races and ethnicities who comprise the out-group as inferior, a perception that adversely affects the nature of cross-racial interactions and relationships. Williams and Eberhardt (2008) point out that if White people are not cognizant of their dominance in United States society as being the touted and revered elite, then it becomes hard for them to believe that other racial and ethnic groups are struggling against those hegemonic structures. According to them, what transpires instead are assumptions about other racial and ethnic groups that become entrenched in their belief system, and any challenges made to that are unwelcomed. "A biological conception of race dampens people's sensitivity to the plight of disadvantaged racial groups and diminishes the desire to change racial inequities"(p. 1037). This lack of self-awareness can lead to racist situations such as the ones shared during our last

research action. Consequently, people of color continue to be questioned as instigators of crimes or violence, to be assumed to be custodial staff or unable to communicate in English, or to be limited in their access to goods and rights that are accorded to White people, as we have seen in what we, as participants, shared. The social distance between us becomes more expansive, and the chance for vulnerability to bring us in deeper connection lessens.

Everyone has tendencies toward implicit or unconscious bias, so we each must be willing to confront and explore our personal biases. The literature informs us that our inability to critically self-reflect while being engaged in cross-racial contexts will not result in outcomes that are rooted in authenticity (Barnett, 2011; Buehler, Gere, Dallavis & Haviland, 2009; Campbell Jones, Campbell Jones, & Lindsey, 2010; Case, 2012; Ezzani & Brooks, 2015; Greenberg, 2014; McGloin, 2015). Not doing so will permit racist assumptions to continue to permeate our society at the individual, group and societal levels. We conclude and the literature supports that self-awareness needs to be a priority on both sides of the racial and ethnic divide. Our experiences as co-inquirers exploring mutual vulnerability in the cross-racial context revealed that our self-awareness is a precursor to being able to act vulnerably with diverse others, and that our level of self-awareness can also be heightened as a result of engaging in mutually vulnerable acts. How can we use these contrasting findings on self-awareness and the lack thereof to help individuals on both sides of the racial and ethnic divide acknowledge their own personal fears and feelings of mistrust so that they can engage in mutually vulnerable acts? One way is to learn from our Black and White voices which contributed greatly to the

research findings since they represent the most polarized racial inequities and therefore present the greatest challenges to human interconnectedness.

Two Powerful Perspectives: Black and White. Whether encountering a situation of White entitlement or facing long-embedded structures that perpetuate racism in our institutions, vulnerability and mutual vulnerability are only possible if both parties on either side of the racial or ethnic divide show a willingness to examine their behaviors. With such intense power differentials at play, this can seem a daunting and even an unachievable endeavor. When we do find someone who is White and who is willing to look at their privilege and commit to equity work, we must allow them to do so openly. The process may not be neat and without error, but we must welcome them and support them. Similarly but different because of their unequal positions, when we find someone who is Black and who is willing to engage in equity work despite their sometimes overwhelming sense of racial battle fatigue, we too must honor their courage in coming to the space and support them accordingly.

During the early stages of the study, as we reflected on the first research action, Janice shared the following perspective which helped the group understand her racialized identity:

> Well, I'm just thinking about when this has played out for me. And it's often right? When I have to be vulnerable and... Which is literally how I honestly feel that I have to live life because this society is not set up for my success. So I have to live vulnerably and take risks often. I'm hyper-aware of myself and all of my surroundings because I have to be for self-preservation. How people respond and interact with... When I'm being vulnerable or sharing something with someone,

> they have the power and the option to not reciprocate that vulnerability and therefore my actions are based on how they react. So my example of being vulnerable and sharing when I was being racially profiled and treated inferiorly because of my race and I pointed to evidence, evidence not angry, just, here are the facts, here's where it is. What are you going to do to help us get past this? And it was, it is what it is, deal with it. And I had to seek other employment. So, I could do all the things and still not get to my end goal. Depending on who I'm interacting with and their reciprocating and meeting me at the point of being vulnerable and taking a risk.

Janice's narrative brings light to the compelling need for Black people to be able to find spaces for healing. Her feelings so candidly shared have implications for adult educators who work with Black students or Black colleagues. Since the completion of the study, I have been exposed to what is being called a model for a "New Vulnerability" which can serve as an emancipatory tool for Black people and other persons of color to transform their negative experiences into more self-affirming ones (Sheared et al., 2010). The model seeks to help persons of color to engage in difficult conversations about race in order to improve how they relate to diverse others.

My study sought to impact interpersonal relationships at the individual, group, and societal levels by introducing mutual vulnerability as a practice that might effectively increase human interconnectedness across races and ethnicities. Although my study did not explicitly target how to transform negative experiences into positive ones for persons of color, the co-inquirers and I found that what we learned about ourselves by participating in the study helped us to view future experiences in a more generative light.

By way of being fully immersed in our research actions exploring vulnerability, we created something similar to this model of New Vulnerability. Both mutual vulnerability and New Vulnerability can equally contribute to the continuing conversation and practices focused on cross-racial dialogue and the value of action. I must make a note to myself to share this resource with Janice and my other co-inquirers as soon as we are able to reunite face-to-face safely. As we concluded our second research action of finishing our sentences, Janice declared her ultimate commitment as follows: When I'm vulnerable across racial lines, my own unfinished work is to allow space for White people who are a part of this work and trying to make a difference." This is a powerful finding as well because it evidences the need for mutual vulnerability. If Elsie, a White woman, is able to demonstrate such a high degree of vulnerability, then it must be reciprocated on the other side of the racial divide.

During the same research action of completing the sentence stems, Elsie shared with us: "When I'm vulnerable across racial lines, I want the other person to see beyond my Whiteness so that I don't feel othered." This is of extreme significance because it reveals a fear on the side of the dominant culture and could explain why individuals well-intentioned like Elsie may be hesitant to be vulnerable in cross-racial contexts. She confessed this to me during our first interview:

> My only anxiety is that I, and I always know this walking into any kind of situation that's a cross-cultural, is that that I don't make anyone feel bad or that I don't offend anyone. And it's not that, I mean I know that that could happen and that we are in a safe enough space that we can work on it, but I still worry about that.

Elsie's awareness of her White privilege (McIntosh, 2003) was refreshing to the space and also contributed to the ability of the other co-inquirers to remain engaged and vulnerable. More importantly, her vulnerable sharing resulted in transformations in thinking for all of us, especially for Janice. She shared the following with me during our second interview regarding the experience of responding to the sentence stems:

> There was one moment in our group where we were going around and sharing one of the prompts that we had. I remember it got to our White co-conspirator and I just remember thinking her comment, I understand that they're probably heartfelt, but they felt vague to me. It felt really vague and I was just wanting to probe and I know it wasn't an opportunity for us to ask each other more questions and I wanted to probe. And then, it came back around and her very next statements were that she wanted to be able to put words to the depth of her feeling and she wasn't able to get those words out.

Janice's initial reaction to Elsie's is typical of what we see in the literature in terms of claims that White people are not serious about or committed to anti-racist work (Case, 2012; Reason, 2005; Spanierman, 2017). But Janice was able to realize that Elsie was indeed genuine and vulnerable in her responses:

> And it was enlightening. It was like, "Oh, well, that makes sense." I've had a lifetime of practice talking about race because this is something we do all the time. So, sitting there sharing felt more like what I do around a group of Black people. That would be not a big deal at all if it was all Black people. That would never happen with a group that looks like ours. So, it was enlightening to hear her

say that she didn't have the words and it made me feel like, "Duh. Okay, this makes sense."

I am reminded of an article within the literature written by Granger (2002), a White woman, which is aptly titled "Friendships between Black and White Women" where she foregrounded the need for "cross-racial friends to confront the racism in the White women and confront the historical mistrust held by the Black women" (p. 1212). This recommendation is aligned with our previous discussion that openly discussing race is a prerequisite to entering in cross-racial friendships.

In our group of participants, we were fortunate to have co-inquirers who were willing to look at themselves and dream of a more positive way to manage our vulnerability so that we decrease our social distance and increase our human interconnectedness. However, these two vulnerable viewpoints have the power to change how we interact with one another at the individual level when it comes to deepening our feelings of human interconnectedness across the racial divide. We can hope that any success we saw within our inquiry group can be scaled to similar success in all levels of society such as within institutions, communities and interpersonal relationships. At least we know that bringing together individuals from different races and ethnicities to share the cross-racial space is a good start in providing opportunities for mutual vulnerability to be nurtured for the sake of greater human interconnectedness.

Conclusion: Addressing the Research Questions

Thus, how did we use vulnerability to explore and express our deep-rooted fears and mistrust in a way that draws out courage for the reciprocation of that vulnerability? The first step was creating the conditions for vulnerability to take place among strangers

who represented different races and ethnicities. Next, we had to understand the methodology that we were going to employ and agree to respect the inquiry, collaborative, and interpersonal strands that comprise the collaborative human inquiry process. Finally, we had to work together to come to a consensus for each research cycle and we collectively brainstormed the best approach, and research action, that would help us arrive at answering the research questions. Through concerted efforts of mutual vulnerability with each other, we discovered that we had common practices in how we acted vulnerably and did not act vulnerably from which emerged the themes of risk-taking and vulnerability, awareness of self and interactions with others, White entitlement and institutional racism, and prior experiences and storytelling. By way of our eagerness to dive deeply into our fears and mistrust concerning our vulnerable interactions with those across the racial divide, we learned that those fears were based on feelings of inferiority and inadequacy in those cross-racial interactions. As we considered how to use the experiential knowledge that we co-constructed into presentational and propositional knowledge, it became apparent to us that we needed to co-construct practical knowledge that would actually impact our social practices for greater human interconnectedness. To this end, we proposed that efforts toward empathic attunement and greater self-awareness of our unconscious behaviors and attitudes were needed to help foster opportunities for individuals to reciprocate the vulnerability that we were willing to demonstrate as part of our new commitments. Following is a description of how the individual findings discussed in the previous chapter evolved into such personal commitments.

Individual Findings: Revelations Become Commitments

In Chapter 5, I shared surprising revelations that each participant experienced by engaging authentically in the study. This chapter seeks to show how these revelations became commitments, and why it was important for us that the study culminate into a change in personal practice for us, underscoring the transformative nature of the overall experience.

Elsie

Elsie's motivation to participate in the study was "Continuing on my journey of growth and action as a White woman in anti-racist work." Her journey began from unknown potential and culminated in unmasked collaborations. When asked to summarize her experience, Elsie shared this statement: "Intentional listening grows understanding which can lead to more impactful cross-cultural collaboration."

For Elsie, she felt more fulfilled during the study when there were moments where she could actually feel the human interconnectedness with her co-inquirers. She shared with me that she did not have this feeling during our last meeting. The significance of this is her desire as a White woman to continue to do this hard work of looking inward and transforming her thoughts and behaviors to be more equitable in her daily practice. As Esme noted, this is rare to find. Nonetheless, the potential for White women and Black women or women of other races or ethnicities to interact positively with one another is supported in the literature (Granger, 2002). These cross-racial relationships provide the space for people like Elsie to grapple with her racism, and for people like Janice to navigate their mistrust. In Elsie's final words, "When I'm vulnerable across racial lines, I'm committed to listening more, unpacking crap, walking

into the fire, and dismantling as much as I can, in an inequitable power dynamic." Elsie's commitment to vulnerability, and mutual vulnerability, in cross-racial relationships is to continue to look inward and grapple graciously with her Whiteness, while searching for opportunities to feel the human interconnectedness she craves.

Esme

Esme's motivation to participate in the study was because "of my cross racial experiences and it is a topic that I enjoy exploring." Her journey started from silence and transitioned into action toward the end of the study. When asked to summarize her experience, Esme shared this lesson learned: "To be vulnerable is to be self-aware."

Esme was able to be vulnerable in a situation with her husband, but chose not to be vulnerable with strangers because of a fear they would not accept her. The significance of this is her willingness to change how she has reacted in the past and transform any future and similar encounters into opportunities to connect with another who she perceives may not accept her. Esme found it interesting and instructive to hear the perspectives of a White woman throughout the study. She was impressed that Elsie was so committed to the work and demonstrated an acute awareness of racial injustices. These injustices had been present all of Esme's life, and it validated her to know that a White woman was aware and that she cared. Whereas negative experiences may have the potential to prevent Esme from expressing her vulnerability in similar future encounters, positive experiences like those with Elsie can motivate and inspire her to seek out more cross-racial relationships (Okech & Champe, 2008; Park, 2012) to overcome that fear. In Esme's final words, "When I'm vulnerable across racial lines, I'm committed to honoring myself, and others, in hopes of getting to a better place, not just for myself, but for the

people in my life." Esme's commitment to vulnerability, and mutual vulnerability, in cross-racial relationships is to continue to look inward and reframe how others perceive her in order to have more fulfilling cross-racial relationships.

Janice

Janice's motivation for participating in the study was because "I want to grow, reflect and learn more about myself and my blind spots. I also want to know what other ethnicities experience and think on an individual level. The more I interface in cross-cultural/racial conversations, the more I can understand myself and others." Her journey commenced from curiosity and concluded in hunger. When asked to summarize her experience, Janice replied with a question: "If you believe that we are all created equally, why are we so unequal?"

For Janice, she came into this collaborative endeavor with intergroup dialogue experiences where the participants held back, causing information-sharing to be unauthentic and censored. She was optimistic about participating in a study where she was given agency along with other co-inquirers to drive the direction of the inquiry. She also hoped that the focus on being vulnerable in a cross-racial context would alter what she had previously experienced, providing her with a new space to hear real, genuine perspectives. She was not disappointed and was witness to a sharing of our deepest fears and feelings when it comes to interacting with someone across racial lines. Seeing Elsie engage so authentically and vulnerably caused Janice to want to interact with White people in more generative, enriching ways. She learned that she would need to remind herself to be patient with White people who are committed to this work and that they may not always be able to properly verbalize their thoughts. The significance of this is the

impact on her personal life, allowing her to try to better trust people outside her typical social group of Black friends. This finding is supported in the literature and supportive of the use of collaborative human inquiry. According to Payne, McDonald and Hamm (2013), cross-racial friendships are more likely to develop among teams who self-manage in an environment of cooperation as opposed to those which are manager-led based on a hierarchy. The collaborative human inquiry methodology allowed each participant to feel fully heard and their contributions equally valued. Autonomy and collaboration provided the conditions for the friendship between Janice and others to develop, and honest expressions of vulnerability accelerated the depth of those new friendships. In Janice's final words, "When I'm vulnerable across racial lines, I'm committed to working on me first, and speaking my truth regardless, and not worrying about how it lands on other people." Janice's commitment to vulnerability, and mutual vulnerability, in cross-racial relationships is to continue to look inward and work on being more patient with, and learning how to trust, those who do not typically fall in her normal group.

Thymai

My motivation in participating in the study was two-pronged because I was driven to conduct research around what might happen if we created a space for individuals from different races or ethnicities to come together and be vulnerable, real, and authentic about their cross-racial relationships. I was also driven to conduct research alongside people, with them. Collaborative human inquiry was the most suitable method because it allowed me to be a fully immersed participant with my co-inquirers. I am certain the outcomes would not be the same had I been a passive observer. My journey began in naivete and finished with conviction. When I think about how to summarize my own

experience, I also posed a question: "Will I remain as convicted standing alone, without my fellow co-inquirers next to me?"

For me, I tended to avoid confrontations that seemed race-based by labeling them instead as White entitlement. I thought that this softer approach was necessary to preserve harmony in our society. This experience helped me learn that White entitlement is just a lesser form of institutional racism, with similar consequences for those who are treated unjustly based on their race or ethnicity. Being able to acknowledge racism when I see it was critical for me to move forward in the study with my co-inquirers, who were already of that understanding. Addressing racism and directly acknowledging it precedes being able to develop meaningful cross-racial relationships. (Okech & Champe, 2008; Rawlins, 2009; Thomas, 1993). The significance of this is my discovery that although I have always considered myself to be active in equity work, I found that when it comes to interacting with others from different races or ethnicities, I took a more passive stance. My final words are thus: "When I'm vulnerable across racial lines, I'm committed to playing less the victim and advocating more for myself and others." My commitment to vulnerability, and mutual vulnerability, in cross-racial relationships is to continue to look inward and take a more active stance in dismantling racism through vulnerable acts over inaction.

Conclusion: Revelations Become Commitments

The revelations that were uncovered during each participant's journey into the collaborative human inquiry around mutual vulnerability indicated that we had learned about ourselves as individuals as much as we learned about our cross-racial interactions with each other as a collective. Rather than remain as individual findings that simply

revealed a new discovery to each of us, we wanted to evaluate our journey to see how it culminated in a change in our practice as well as a change in our awareness. It was important to us that we did not exit the study the same person as we were when we entered. In other words, we sought to be transformed by the experience. In chapter 4, I discussed how we had indeed been transformed by participation in the inquiry. According to Heron (1996), we underwent a "transformation of personhood" (p. 38). However, to express our devotion and ongoing responsibility for continuing the work after the conclusion of the study, each co-inquirer, inspired by our individual revelations, made a formal commitment to expand our intrapersonal and interpersonal skills in the realm of cross-racial relationships.

For adult educators seeking to help individuals move from revelations and awareness to commitment and changed practice, it was the experience of cooperation and collaboration that allowed the transformations to occur. We felt empowered in our co-inquirer role with the agency and decision-making capacity to drive the inquiry in a way that made sense to us, and that aligned with our own lived experiences. Knowing that the knowledge we co-constructed as a group was rooted in those lived experiences furnished us with a sense of ownership which also propelled us to remain engaged during the process so that we could eventually arrive at some practical knowledge that could be applied to our practices around vulnerability and mutual vulnerability. Finally, we hoped that by showing our commitment to social change, readers might be more inclined to embrace the recommended tool (discussed in chapter 7) that we created so that more of us are committed to working toward increasing our feelings of interconnectedness with all humans on this earth, regardless of race or ethnicity.

Overall Findings

We can do our part based on what we learned about ourselves in this study, but how do we draw out the courage for others to reciprocate with their own vulnerability? Where does mutual vulnerability come in to the equation? We discovered that vulnerability alone cannot increase feelings of human interconnectedness. To arrive at a point where persons can express themselves vulnerably in a cross-racial context, there has to be a level of self-awareness on the part of both engaged parties in the relationship such that they are willing to sacrifice their learned beliefs and behaviors in exchange for more restorative and generative mindsets. Had my participants simply shared vulnerably without looking inward at their deepest thoughts and feelings, putting their sense of self on the line, it would have been a case of us being vulnerable just for the sake of being vulnerable. Before we made the conscious decision to be vulnerable, we also had to choose to be a critical friend of our own self. Otherwise, the risk is greater on one side of the interaction or relationship, and mutual vulnerability cannot be achieved. Without mutual vulnerability, there is no deep sense of human interconnectedness. Lastly, we discovered that for self-awareness to lead to mutual vulnerability, increasing our feelings of human interconnectedness, we had to make the conscious choice to be vulnerable.

What we discovered from our experiences and resulting data is that neither vulnerability nor mutual vulnerability is possible without a sense of self-awareness on the part of those who wish to engage in deep connections with others across racial lines. The literature informs us that our inability to critically self-reflect while being engaged in cross-racial contexts will not result in outcomes that are rooted in authenticity (Barnett, 2011; Buehler, Gere, Dallavis & Haviland, 2009; Campbell Jones, Campbell Jones, &

Lindsey, 2010; Case, 2012; Ezzani & Brooks, 2015; Greenberg, 2014; McGloin, 2015). Not doing so will permit racist assumptions to permeate our society at the individual, group and societal levels. We must find a way to promote self-awareness so that mutual vulnerability can enter into the equation of cross-racial interactions and relationships.

Self-Awareness before Mutual Vulnerability

To consider the relationship between self-awareness and mutual vulnerability, we can consider the definition of each to understand why the former would need to precede the latter. Morin (2011) provides us with the following working definition: "Self-awareness represents the capacity of becoming the object of one's own attention" (p. 807). He expands on this by distinguishing self-awareness from self-consciousness. One who is self-conscious can "perceive and process stimuli from the environment" (p. 808). However, to be self-aware, individuals have to be able to reflect on their experience of doing so. This reflection in a state of being self-aware permits the individual to notice their emotions and attitudes, their thoughts and intentions. Engaging in collaborative human inquiry required a balance of action and reflection. As such, as co-inquirers we could not avoid reflecting as we engaged in each research action individually and as we debriefed each research action collectively. Only through a willingness to be self-aware could we then emotionally disclose our fears and mistrust in the context of cross-racial relationships. Although the first research action helped us to identify our resistance to vulnerability in cross-racial interactions and relationships, it was the second research action that fully uncovered our fears of inadequacy and mistrust of how racially and ethnically different others perceived us. We held ourselves accountable to responding to the sentence stems about how we are vulnerable across racial lines. In this way, we were

able to answer the research question in terms of the fears that needed to be surfaced (Appendix K).

Since the definition of vulnerability is "uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure" (Brown, 2012, p. 34), mutual vulnerability is our reliance on each other to embrace uncertainty, take risks and face emotional exposure. When engaging with another vulnerably in a cross-racial context or relationship, if the other party is not self-aware, not in tune with their emotions and attitudes, their thoughts and intentions, it is not likely they will receive that vulnerable act in kind nor reciprocate.

I look back to the experiences that we shared as part of the first research action. When we were vulnerable with others in a cross-racial context, the outcomes were unfavorable, except in the situation between Esme and her husband. In response to her expression of vulnerability, he reciprocated with his own emotional declaration of feeling mortified. He was self-aware and able to take note of his comments and behavior, then acknowledge her feelings and share his own feelings. Referring back to the literature, self-awareness potentiates emotional vulnerability, which is a precursor to mutual vulnerability (Haugland et al., 2017; Ito & Bligh, 2017; Shim, 2017; Uitto et al., 2016).

The ability to be self-aware is rooted in our capacity to reflect on our own thoughts and behaviors and how they affect our relationships with others, namely racially and ethnically different others. The quality of our interactions with racially and ethnically different others will not be transformed unless we are willing, on both sides of the divide, to look at our own behaviors and see how they prevent us from being vulnerable and connecting with others in more productive and meaningful ways. We saw that on both sides of the racial divide, we can all learn how to be more patient, receptive

and understanding with ourselves and each other and view these situations as an opportunity to connect. What we discovered based on our individual and collective experiences around vulnerability in a cross-racial context is that self-awareness most definitely is an essential component for greater human interconnectedness. Mutual vulnerability can strengthen self-awareness, but self-awareness is still a precursor to being vulnerable, then mutually vulnerable.

Mutual Vulnerability before Interconnectedness

We can consider these two concepts in a similar way by examining how mutual vulnerability and our reliance on each other to embrace uncertainty, take risks and face emotional exposure, relates to human interconnectedness in a cross-racial context. A relevant definition of interconnectedness here is as a "human condition of mutual dependence and a quest for comfort and well-being" (Rozmarin, 2017, p. 554). However, the question here is whether being vulnerable with another individual from a different race or ethnicity in reciprocal fashion increases our feeling of interconnectedness with them. Do we begin to depend on them and want for their comfort and well-being? Based on what the participants experienced throughout the course of the study, we can say affirmatively that this was the case. Due to the affective dimension that is present when one is vulnerably disclosing their feelings, a bond begins to form between those parties. In his reference to Freire's pedagogy of love, John (2016) summarized personal and caring adult relationships in this way: "There is evidence that emotions build trust and solidarity which foster sharing, dialogue and action and declare our fundamental interconnectedness as humans" (p. 348). This is characteristic of the emotional vulnerability discussed in Chapter 2 as Spanierman and Smith (2017) foreground "the

emotional nature of the work" (p. 612) if we are to improve relations and increase our connectedness between different races and ethnicities.

Although the co-inquirers were fearful of being exposed to others, knowing that others felt equally vulnerable to being seen, gave us more confidence. Even though we were uncomfortable with not knowing the outcomes of our choices or action, realizing that others feel equally uncertain, gave us some comfort. And though we felt shame in awareness of our fallibility, knowing that others felt equally afraid of making mistakes helped us feel stronger. In keeping with the literature, our findings echo what many scholars have proposed regarding the power of mutual vulnerability in renewing and restoring human relationships with others (Bagnoli, 2016; Brown, 2012; Giese & Thiel, 2014; Guishard, 2009; Gunaratnam, 2011; Haugland et al., 2017; Ito & Bligh, 2017; Petherbridge, 2016; McKinnon & Greenberg, 2017; Rowland, 2016; Rozmarin, 2017). Perhaps Brown (2012) captured it best when she stated that "The result of this mutually respectful vulnerability is increased connection, trust and engagement" (p. 46). Having experienced this in a cross-racial context with five different ethnicities represented is powerful and steeped with potential.

In addition to being self-aware, we also had to engage in acts of mutual vulnerability which called for us to emotionally disclose our genuine thoughts and feelings to each other. Not only did we have to process what our co-inquirers shared, we had to be willing to reflect on how we processed that information and assess our own feelings and thoughts in response. In doing so, we noticed that there were commonalities in how we expressed vulnerability. Examples of how we commonly expressed vulnerability were revealed in the themes of risk-taking toward action, our experiences of

entitlement and racism, and our desire for empathic attunement. Even though we had experiences where we were unable to be vulnerable, each participant understood the value and necessity of embracing uncertainty, taking risks, and emotionally exposing ourselves in order to improve our cross-racial relationships going forward. With regards to our respective past experiences of entitlement or racism, I was the only participant who hesitated to name previous acts of White entitlement as racist. Nonetheless, we each expressed a sense of feeling defeated because of our negative experiences, but agreed that it was necessary to continue to demonstrate vulnerability and act in more productive and generative ways. As we shared our fears of inadequacy and inferiority, our hopes of countering those fears gave rise to a desire for empathic attunement, for others to see themselves in us and act out of mutual care and respect. Unfortunately, there was not time for us to explore more in depth how these commonalities could help us move beyond our fears. We did however discover that expressing vulnerability with each other, in other words, engaging in mutual vulnerability, did cause us to feel more connected and empathically attuned to one another.

Unique Findings

As our collaborative human inquiry came to an end during our last meeting, the participants felt compelled to make sure that the work in which we had invested would culminate in some call to action. To this end, we contemplated the pattern among our themes that had emerged over the course of the study and discovered a unique finding that could carry potential for change.

An Emergent Theory of Action

Upon reviewing the eight themes which presented themselves during the first research action, to which we added two additional themes in each subsequent research action respectively, we noticed that we were able to form a theory of action. "A theory of action is a link between cause and effect i.e. if we take a particular action, then we expect that behaviour to have specific effects" (Hopkins, 2012). Our proposed theory of action could possibly be used to foster change at the individual, group or societal levels of society in order to deepen feelings of human interconnectedness across the racial divide. See Figure 5 for a graphic explanation of this theory of action.

Figure 5: The Proposed Theory of Action

My attempt at a textual explanation can be phrased as an if…then… statement. If we make the conscious choice to engage in vulnerability and risk-taking, we can commit to doing the work necessary to transform our experiences and change future narratives around cross-racial interactions and relationships, disrupting White entitlement and institutional racism. The work would consist of 1) acknowledging our lack of self-awareness to improve our sense of self-awareness, 2) replacing our unjust assumptions

about others with generative interactions with others, 3) mitigating our feelings of inadequacy or inferiority in order to be more empathically attuned to another, and 4) leveraging prior experiences in an optimistic manner where hope is sustained. This is admittedly a lofty proposal for action and change, but we felt it was necessary to include in our overall findings with hopes that others might also see its potential.

Chapter Summary

Through a discussion of the findings, we sought to show how our research question and sub-questions were answered. In order to use vulnerability to explore and express our deep-rooted fears and mistrust in a way that draws out courage, or better yet self-awareness, for the reciprocation of that vulnerability, each participant had to engage vulnerably across three agreed upon research actions. We learned that in order to do this successfully, each participant had to process what our co-inquirers shared, and we had to be willing to reflect on how we processed that information and assess our own feelings and thoughts in response. In addition to being self-aware, we also had to engage in acts of mutual vulnerability which called for us to emotionally disclose our genuine thoughts and feelings to each other. This revealed a commonality of fears of being dismissed due to perceptions of being inferior or inadequate. Sharing on such an affective level allowed us to experience feelings of deep human interconnectedness with one another. Once the inquiry concluded, each participant hungered for more, and we made tentative plans to stay connected. In fact, at the time of this writing, we each committed to a reunion, once I have completed the defense and our current circumstances related to the coronavirus pandemic allow us, to see how our collective work, our newly formed cross-racial friendships, can be taken to the next level.

VII. REFLECTIONS, CONCLUSIONS, SIGNIFICANCE, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter will include final reflections regarding the methodology used in the study, final conclusions resulting from the study, significance of the study in terms of contributions to theory and practice, and final recommendations for future research.

Reflections

I set out to conduct a study that would help us understand what potential might exist for increasing feelings of human interconnectedness when individuals from different races and ethnicities are reciprocally vulnerable with each other. To this end, I attempted to set the stage for individuals from different races and ethnicities to convene under conditions where relationships could be formed and trust could be established. This required enlisting people who had some background in cultural proficiency or diversity training and who were willing to explore their individual and collective experiences of vulnerability in a cross-racial context. Additionally, being vulnerable meant taking risks, accepting uncertainty, and disclosing emotionally (Brown, 2012). I was fortunate to find three participants who were willing and enthusiastic enough to commit wholeheartedly to this act of courage. Collectively and constructively, we were able to create a pathway for expression of our deeply rooted fears and mistrust about engaging with those different from us. The methodology, collaborative human inquiry, provided the most appropriate means to and structure for our common purpose. As a research methodology, it was highly amenable to our study due its participatory nature and increased potential for validity resulting from engagement over multiple research cycles. As a methodology for conducting multicultural awareness training, caution should be taken to ensure that all

participants are engaging in the process voluntarily and have demonstrated the requisite self-awareness to act authentically and ethically. The philosophy or theory of inquiry, social constructionism, framed how we moved forward within our "interactive human community" (Crotty, 1998, p. 55) as fellow co-inquirers to explore mutual vulnerability with the goal of uncovering and determining its potential for deepening feelings of human interconnectedness across diverse races and ethnicities. The combination of these factors permitted us to arrive at the following conclusions.

Conclusions

Self-Awareness before Interconnectedness

The first conclusion is that self-awareness precedes mutual vulnerability, which precedes human interconnectedness. Being vulnerable in a cross-racial context necessitates that we be willing to look inward at our existing thoughts, feelings, and beliefs. A lack of willingness or a lack of self-awareness prevents us from being able to reciprocate when someone has expressed their vulnerability before us. Fears of inferiority and inadequacy along with mistrust of those who are racially or ethnically different from us are the strongest emotions that hinder our willingness to be vulnerable. This denies us the chance of entering into deep connection and fulfilling relationships, which as humans, is a natural desire and necessity. We need others in order to support our mental, emotional, physical and spiritual growth and well-being (Barrett-Lennard, 2007).

Vulnerability is the Only Choice

The second conclusion is that the decision to be vulnerable and self-aware is a conscious one that we can make in order to increase the possibility of greater human

interconnectedness across the racial divide. Whether we are the ones initiating the vulnerable practice or whether another is counting on us to reciprocate their act of vulnerability, the choice is there to be made. The choice to not be vulnerable "allows us to ignore those common traits of our humanity that either fail to match the fanciful images we have of ourselves, or that make us feel uncomfortable and exposed" (Bailey, 2011, p. 481). Choosing not to be vulnerable permits the status quo to persist and does not provide the space for us to grow in how we relate and connect with others who are racially or ethnically different. So even though vulnerability is a choice, perhaps it is the only choice? At least this is what the co-inquirers and I believe.

Significance of the Study

Contribution to Theory: Vulnerability

This study offers evidence in the form of contributions to adult education theory that elevate our existing knowledge of vulnerability and human interconnectedness in the context of cross-racial relationships. Research outcomes have implications for Allport's (1954) seminal theory on intergroup contact, later enhanced by Pettigrew (1998), since they emphasize the potential for diverse groups to engage in positive ways that could lead to close relationships and friendships. However, rather than checking off a list of conditions that must be met for cross-racial relationships to flourish, being vulnerable requires a deeper level of engagement and reflection which helps us feel more connected to others, and to our own sense of self. By illuminating how human interconnectedness could be possible between individuals who do not share a common racial or ethnic background, a link can be established between vulnerability and meaningful cross-racial relationships, with self-awareness as the mediating phenomenon.

The study's focus on vulnerability as a resource to be leveraged against fear and mistrust in a cross-racial context can also amplify the work of adult education professionals who find themselves working in community and interacting regularly with increasingly diverse populations. Prominent figures in adult education have developed a handbook, including an array of contributing authors, which addresses race and the need for race discourse to support more productive and generative ways of communicating across the racial divide (Sheared, Johnson-Bailey, Colin, Peterson, & Brookfield, 2010). In fact, the stated purpose of the handbook is "to demonstrate that if people share their experiences, listen to their own stories and those of others, and reflect on the meanings that underlie their thoughts and feelings, then as teachers, scholars, students, parents, administrators, and citizens of the world, they can create new opportunities to work and communicate with one another" (p. 343). This seems identical to what the co-inquirers in this study achieved in just a few months. Through the sharing of our individual experiences of vulnerability combined with our collective experiences of vulnerability within the group, we learned about each other's thoughts and feelings, as well as our own, as they pertained to interacting with cross-racial others. Our findings regarding the commonalities in how we practiced vulnerability helped us feel more connected to one another since we discovered shared meaning while engaging in shared vulnerability. The fears and mistrust that were uncovered revealed the true meaning behind our thoughts and feelings and helped peel away protective layers as we admitted our feelings of inferiority toward one another. By participating in this study, we discovered new and generative ways of communicating with others across the racial divide.

In this adult education handbook, the idea of a "New Vulnerability" is introduced as part of a program that advocates for self-healing, titled Self Affirming Soul Healing Africans (SASHA). This model is centered around African principles and the "New Vulnerability" stage is characterized by the individual transitioning from reacting to negative responses around race to choosing to live "in action" with the world (Sheared et al., 2010). The authors believed that dialogue and difficult conversations will increase understanding about how race plays a role in people's lives as well as uncover and improve how they engage with racially different others. A specific call to action is communicated to its readers as follows: "We now invite you to read, listen, and deliberate about the ways in which you may exhibit racist tendencies or acts in your personal, social, or professional lives" (p. 24). Again, what the New Vulnerability model proposes is vastly similar to what we accomplished in this study. Each co-inquirer shared an experience of difficulty in being vulnerable which was based on our skepticism of how we would be received by others. Such negative experiences could affect how we choose to interact going forward. However, through participation in a collaborative human inquiry which foregrounded issues of race, and which required that we be fully immersed in research actions that demanded our vulnerability, we came to realize that we cannot run from those experiences but must face them with heightened awareness of our own personal biases. Although none of us used the word healing to describe our inquiry experiences, we were each transformed by the experience as was illustrated in the previous chapters.

With regards to contributions to improving cross-racial dialogue, the study's use of collaborative human inquiry as the methodology can inform future directions for such

difficult conversations and needed adult development. This type of approach allowed for participants to share, listen, and reflect in spaces where each person and their lived experiences were valued. As co-inquirers, they were empowered as equals throughout each convening and conversation. The power of such a highly collaborative methodology and how it provided me and my co-inquirers with the necessary conditions to take risks and be vulnerable with one another can serve as a model for how to engage with racially and ethnically others in classrooms specifically or in communities in general. Lastly, since our vulnerable experiences participating in the study led to the creation of a tangible tool for action, there is potential for this tool to complement the SASHA model, thus ushering in vulnerability, or a new vulnerability, as the clear choice moving forward for increasing human interconnectedness across the racial divide.

Finally, this study contributes to other existing theory on vulnerability by providing insights on what conditions are necessary for an individual to be comfortable expressing vulnerability, and how the experience of mutual vulnerability impacts interpersonal cross-racial relationships. Since neither Brown (2010, 2012) nor Rozmarin (2017) discussed the potential for vulnerability within a racial context, this study adds to their literature base by leveraging vulnerability and its capacity for greater interconnectedness with diverse others. Although Brown (2012) defines shame in her work as an "experience of believing we are flawed" (p. 69), our findings that feelings of inferiority and inadequacy prevented us from being our authentic selves in past cross-racial situations can inform her "shame categories" (p. 69), namely the one regarding stereotypes and labels. Lastly, what we uncovered about the condition of self-awareness as a precursor to mutual vulnerability can also be instructive in terms of what

intrapersonal skills are needed before one is able to face and embrace uncertainty and take the risk of emotionally exposing themselves to others. Revealing the intrapersonal experience around vulnerability and why or when it may be easier or more challenging for certain individuals extends the knowledge base around the need for awareness of self.

The interpersonal experience of mutual vulnerability could enhance theories of social distance, providing explanations for how individuals can confront and break down barriers that prevent them from sustaining longer-lasting friendships in general, or in cross-racial friendships specifically. If we consider the work of Rozmarin (2017) and her views on vulnerability as a mediator of conflict and generator of reconciliation, it is possible that the commonalities revealed around our practices of vulnerability will provide hope in the case of conflicts, and even more so, cross-racial conflict. In writing about how unequal power can hinder individuals' abilities to live as full human beings, she wrote: "Recognizing our shared human vulnerability is the affective bridge that paves the way for critical evaluation of inequality in terms of vulnerability between groups" (p. 552). As co-inquirers who possessed the capacity to make decisions about the direction of the inquiry process, we each felt empowered to engage in "authentic collaboration" (Heron, 1996) and to consequently share openly and vulnerably in the intergroup space. Even though the collaborative human inquiry process did not remove the inequities that exist between racial groups, the sharing of our deepest feelings and emotions did provide the affective antidote to the anxiety that we each felt as we navigated the research actions.

Ultimately, we discovered that vulnerability alone cannot increase one's feeling of human interconnectedness with another. A level of self-awareness on the part of all parties in the relationship is needed so that they are willing to examine their learned

beliefs and behaviors in order to express themselves authentically and vulnerably in a cross-racial context. If one party is not able or willing to do so by revealing their underlying thoughts and attitude, mutual vulnerability cannot be achieved.

Although changes to policy and decision-making were not originally anticipated as a result of this study, we were able to generate a self-awareness tool that can be used at the individual, group and societal levels to support mutual vulnerability and thus advance more inclusive relationships across the racial divide. As such, a discussion of how the study contributes to the practice of vulnerability follows.

Contribution to Practice: A Recommended Tool

This study contributes to practice, both within and outside of the field of adult education. It has the potential of improving our interpersonal relationships across the racial divide within society in general. At the individual level, our relationships with our fellow humans stand to be enhanced if a more positive conception of vulnerability takes hold among the general population. If we embrace vulnerability in our personal and professional lives when engaging with other racial and ethnic groups, then we enlarge and expand our network of love and support (Barrett-Lennard, 2007; Dinkins, 2017; Linklater, 2009, 2010; Lu, Dane & Gellman, 2005; Rettie, 2003). At the group level, we can positively influence the communities and organizations to which we belong by incorporating this practice of vulnerability into our social interactions in order to be inclusive of all races and ethnicities (Agamanolis, 2008; Ventres, Dharamsi, & Ferrer, 2017; Watson, 2015). At the societal level, there is the possibility for systemic changes to be enacted around mutual and reciprocal vulnerability. If we start to view vulnerability as an asset in our personal and professional lives that strengthens those

relationships, we could see a positive impact on how humans treat each other on a global or universal scale (Hill, 2006; Linklater, 2009; Montero & Colman, 2010; Watson, 2015).

Across these levels of social interaction, adult educators could adopt a vulnerable mindset with the goal of better connecting with the learners they serve and the colleagues with whom they collaborate, regardless of race or ethnicity. Based on our findings, a vulnerable mindset involves making the conscious decision to be vulnerable, and then being willing to assess our own thoughts and behaviors, naming racism when we see it, not letting past experiences prevent us from wanting to connect with others, navigating our feelings of inadequacy, and communicating in ways that are inclusive. Regardless of the context in which they work, an adult education practitioner who is willing to show their vulnerability by taking risks, accepting uncertainty, and showing their emotions, may be better positioned to develop a more trust-based relationship with their learners and colleagues alike. If teachers and students learn how to navigate the terrain of being mutually vulnerable with one another, adult education practices in the classroom could shift from more instructive models to more co-constructive ones.

We learned that human interconnectedness is contingent upon mutual vulnerability, which is itself dependent upon self-awareness. Any adult educator wishing to develop meaningful connections with their racially or ethnically diverse students will need to become a reflective practitioner who creates learning environments where both parties feel supported as they lean into each other and engage in the reciprocal work of bridging the racial divide. This could lead to stronger teacher-student relationships that might result in a higher quality educational experience for the student, and a more enriching experience for the educator. Given that multicultural classes are on the rise in

our universities, students from different races or ethnicities as the mainstream college population may feel more accepted by their professors if they sense a willingness on their part to show vulnerability in the classroom.

The journey of being immersed in various research cycles, balancing action with reflection, allowed participants to co-construct knowledge that was grounded in experience, presented in ways that depicted how we chose to be vulnerable with one another, led to the formation of concepts or themes that helped us frame and name those experiences, which led to individual discoveries about our own vulnerable practices and how to improve them for greater chances at more meaningful connections with racially or ethnically different others. These research cycles repeated three times helped transform our experiential beliefs into experiential knowledge, our presentational beliefs into presentational knowledge, and so forth. Ultimately, and collectively, the co-inquirers and I agreed that our findings had to lead to some tangible recommended change in practice.

We discussed how our proposed theory of action could be made actionable for anyone who wished to begin their own journey of self-awareness in cross-racial contexts. Given that leveraging vulnerability to connect more deeply and meaningfully with others is a conscious choice that we make, and being self-aware about our own thoughts and attitudes helps us to take risks, embrace uncertainty, and face emotional exposure, we created a worksheet that creates opportunities for individuals to pause, reflect on their thoughts, attitudes, and intentions, and consider alternate ways of interacting with racially or ethnically different others that are more productive and generative, and fulfilling. In order to develop such a worksheet, we believed that the knowledge we co-constructed together could serve as the inspiration for how we formulated our reflective questions.

For this reason, we chose to use our final commitment statements, generated from the second research action, to design a Worksheet for Self-Awareness to help willing individuals start on their journey toward mutual vulnerability (Appendix O).

Unanimously, we felt that the research action of finishing the sentence stems regarding how we interact across racial lines required us to go the deepest into our selves. Full immersion in this action resulted in the deepest feelings of interconnectedness with one another. We propose this Worksheet can be used in large institutional systems, in organizations and communities, or in daily interactions where inequities are present. For the adult education context, the Worksheet can serve as a tool for helping to set norms in the learning environment to ensure dialogue between and among instructor and teachers is inclusive and generative. The intent for proposing this Worksheet as an actionable tool is not to be prescriptive, but suggestive based on our own lessons learned during the study.

Recommendations for Further Research

As we contemplated the theory of action that we created based on the themes which surfaced across the multiple research cycles, we were able to identify two areas for future research.

First, in order to investigate how a lack of self-awareness manifests in unjust racist assumptions, we recommend a deep look into explicit and implicit biases, with focus on the latter. The biases which we harbor internally and which escape our daily practices unless we make a conscious effort to identify them are the most harmful due their latent nature. In a study of teachers and administrators in a Texas school district who were certain that they supported their Muslim students and families through their

equitable practices and programs, observations conducted by the researchers revealed the opposite (Ezzani & Brooks, 2015). Future research can focus on identifying the implicit biases that we hold and which act as blind spots for us. Study participants, on both of the racial divide, can be asked to assess their thoughts and attitudes around cross-racial relationships or interactions to determine how they might lead to unjust assumptions of others. Frankly, a study can be designed similarly to our second research action whereby requiring that we complete sentence stems targeted our implicit biases that hindered our ability to be able to engage vulnerably. Furthermore, since this study involved only women, it would be of interest to extend such a study to male participants for a greater variety of perspectives and thus a broader array of data. Research that is explicitly geared toward vulnerably examining our thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors to ensure they are empathetic toward and inclusive of all human beings will add greatly to the research base regarding human interconnectedness within cross-racial relationships.

Second, a fertile area for additional research could be to study the specific inadequacies that humans feel, on both sides of the racial divide and to examine in depth where these feelings of inferiority originate. If research could uncover these origins, it may be possible to open up vulnerability in a whole new way that could deepen our feelings of human interconnectedness with one another. One article in the literature seemed to underscore the potential for this. In a project to see if social workers could be taught to become more empathetically attuned to their multicultural patients (Lu, Dane & Gellman, 2005), the researchers used an experiential model which asked participants to empty, contemplate, and be present. Emptying required them to release former attachments in a stage of unknowing that makes room for new perceptions of

interrelatedness. Through discussion groups that took place after engaging in the experiential activities, the researchers found that the intervention resulted in them interacting with their patients in more culturally sensitive ways as a result of heightened awareness of others and a heightened capacity to connect with others. Perhaps a similar model could be used in future intergroup dialogues as a pre-activity to engaging in conversations around race. The emptying stage, which requires one to let go of past attachments and make space for new perceptions, could be the step that can help humans become more self-aware, more willing to be vulnerable, and more capable of reciprocating another's showing of vulnerability.

Chapter Summary

The ability to be vulnerable is a resource that has the potential to break down emotional barriers and lead to a new kind of human interconnectedness across races and ethnicities. Using collaborative human inquiry as the methodology for this study allowed us to engage in vulnerable activities that helped us identify our fears and mistrusts that have the tendency to guide our behaviors in an ongoing cycle of implicit and explicit bias. Through self-awareness of our biased thoughts, attitudes, and emotions, coupled with the choice to be vulnerable, we can leverage vulnerability and transform it for the sake of humanity. Research is needed that illustrates the urgency for us to seek out ways to feel humanly connected to others, especially those from different races and ethnicities, to expand our network of love and support (Barrett-Lennard, 2007; Dinkins, 2017; Linklater, 2009, 2010; Lu, Dane & Gellman, 2005; Rettie, 2003). By incorporating a practice of vulnerability into our interpersonal interactions at the individual, group, and

societal level that is inclusive of all races and ethnicities, we can help restore humanity (Agamanolis, 2008; Ventres, Dharamsi, & Ferrer, 2017; Watson, 2015).

At the time of this dissertation being defended, our country erupted into a chaos of violent riots following yet another incident where a Black man was killed by a White policeman using unnecessary force and restraint during an arrest. Sadly, the violence overshadowed the potential for communities to work with their local law enforcement agency to problem-solve around these tragic events. I am more certain than ever that we need a new approach to dealing with racism, and I am hopeful that this study on mutual vulnerability might point us in the direction of healing and hope as a multi-racial society.

APPENDIX SECTION

APPENDIX A

Email for Recruitment in a Qualitative Research Study

Title of Study: Mutual Vulnerability: Deepening Human Interconnectedness in Cross-Racial Relationships

To: Thymai Dong (ttd23@txstate.edu)

From: Thymai Dong (ttd23@txstate.edu)

BCC: [identified email addresses to be determined]

Subject: Research Participation Invitation: Mutual Vulnerability: Deepening Human Interconnectedness in Cross-Racial Relationships

This email message is an approved request for participation in research that has been approved by the Texas State Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Dear [name of identified potential participant],

The purpose of this study is an exploration of mutual vulnerability in order to uncover and determine its potential for deepening feelings of human interconnectedness across diverse races and ethnicities. The proposed study will provide us with a better understanding as individuals from different races and ethnicities attempt to be reciprocally vulnerable with each other. Setting the stage for these specific relationship-

building conditions has the potential to break down emotional barriers and could lead to a new kind of human interconnectedness across races and ethnicities.

- You were selected as a potential participant in this study because you have experience with self-reflection in the context of cross-racial relationships and have demonstrated your hope to contribute to positive social change through your volunteer activities. If you choose to participate, you would need to commit to:
  - a one-hour orientation group meeting
  - a three-hour initiation group meeting
  - three regular group meetings over the course of four months (3-5 hours)
  - a three-hour concluding group meeting
  - two 30-minute semi-structured interviews

- Reasonable efforts will be made to keep the personal information in your research record private and confidential. Any identifiable information obtained in connection with this study will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law.

- You do not have to be in this study if you do not want to. You may also refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw from it at any time without consequences of any kind or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

To participate in this research or ask questions about this research please contact me at Thymai Dong, 512-203-3496, ttd23@txstate.edu.

This project [insert IRB Reference Number or Exemption Number] was approved by the Texas State IRB on [insert IRB approval date or date of Exemption]. Pertinent questions or concerns about the research, research participants' rights, and/or research-related injuries to participants should be directed to the IRB chair, Dr. Denise Gobert 512-716-2652 – (dgobert@txstate.edu) or to Monica Gonzales, IRB Regulatory Manager 512-245-2334 - mailto:(meg201@txstate.edu)

APPENDIX B

Informed Consent Form

Study Title: Mutual Vulnerability: Deepening Human Interconnectedness in Cross-Racial Relationships

Principal Investigator: Thymai Dong

Email: ttd23@txstate.edu

Phone: 512-203-3496

Co-Investigator/Faculty Advisor: Dr. Ann Brooks

Email: abrooks@txstate.edu

Phone: 512-245-1936

This consent form will give you the information you will need to understand why this research study is being done and why you are being invited to participate. It will also describe what you will need to do to participate as well as any known risks, inconveniences or discomforts that you may have while participating. We encourage you to ask questions at any time. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to sign this form and it will be a record of your agreement to participate. You will be given a copy of this form to keep.

PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND

You are invited to participate in a study on vulnerability in cross-racial relationships, and how expressing our vulnerability might lead to increased interconnectedness with people from other races. The information will be gathered through individual semi-structured interviews and group meetings with other participants in the study. The information

gathered will be used to understand how individuals experience their own and others' willingness to be vulnerable in cross-racial relationships. You are being asked to participate because you have experience with self-reflection in the context of cross-racial relationships and have demonstrated your hope to contribute to positive social change through your volunteer activities.

PROCEDURES

1. Group Meetings

If you agree to be in this study, you will participate in the following:

• a one-hour orientation meeting to learn about this research process

• a three-hour initiation meeting to create guidelines for our interactions as a group and to get to know the other participants

• three regular group meetings over the course of four months (each meeting will be 3-5 hours long)

• a three-hour concluding meeting to look at overall findings and share final reflections

This will add up to a total of 16-22 possible hours for our group meetings. All meetings will be audiotaped to make sure that they are recorded accurately.

2. Individual Semi-Structured Interviews

• two brief semi-structured interviews with the principal researcher

Each interview will last approximately 30 minutes and will be scheduled after the first and third month of the study. The interviews may be audio-recorded and the researcher may take notes as well.

RISKS/DISCOMFORTS

You may experience emotional discomfort because you will be asked to talk about your own vulnerability in the context of a cross-racial group. In the event that some of the interview questions make you uncomfortable or upset, you are always free to decline to answer or to stop your participation at any time.

Should you feel discomfort after participating and you are a Texas State University student, you may contact the University Health Services for counseling services at 512-245-2161. They are located at 298 Student Center Drive, in San Marcos, Texas. If you are not a Texas State University student, you may connect with counseling resources listed online through a search within your city of residence.

BENEFITS/ALTERNATIVES

You may benefit from this study by exposure to other participants' perspectives on cross-racial interactions. Additionally, the information you provide may contribute to existing knowledge of vulnerability and human interconnectedness in the context of interracial relationships and provide a basis for developing education for adults that improves their ability to interact more openly in cross-racial context.

EXTENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY

Reasonable efforts will be made to keep the personal information in your research record private and confidential. Any identifiable information obtained in connection with this study will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. The members of the research team, and the Texas State University Office of Research Compliance (ORC) may access the data. The ORC monitors research

studies to protect the rights and welfare of research participants. Your real name will not be used in any written reports or publications which result from this research, but a pseudonym will be used instead to protect your identity. Data will be kept for three years (per federal regulations) after the study is completed and then destroyed.

PAYMENT/COMPENSATION

You will not be paid for your participation in this study.

PARTICIPATION IS VOLUNTARY

You do not have to be in this study if you do not want to. You may also refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw from it at any time without consequences of any kind or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

QUESTIONS

If you have any questions or concerns about your participation in this study, you may contact the Principal Investigator, Thymai Dong, at: 512-203-3496 or ttd23@txstate.edu. This project was approved by the Texas State IRB on [date]. Pertinent questions or concerns about the research, research participants' rights, and/or research-related injuries to participants should be directed to the IRB Chair, Dr. Denise Gobert 512-716-2652 – (dgobert@txstate.edu) or to Monica Gonzales, IRB Regulatory Manager 512-245-2334 - (meg201@txstate.edu).

DOCUMENTATION OF CONSENT

I have read this form and decided that I will participate in the project described above. Its general purposes, the particulars of involvement and possible risks have been explained to my satisfaction. I understand I can withdraw at any time.

Your participation in this research project may be recorded using audio or video recording devices. Recordings will assist with accurately documenting your responses. You have the right to refuse the audio or video recording. Please select one of the following options:

I consent to audio recording:

Yes _____ No _____

I consent to video recording:

Yes _____ No _____

_____ _____ _____

Printed Name of Study Participant **Signature** of Study Participant Date Signed

_____ _____

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent Date Signed

APPENDIX C

Timeline of Data Collection and Analysis

The participants/co-inquirers attended 17-18 total hours of meeting time:

- an orientation meeting (1 hour)
- an initiation group meeting (3 hours)
- three regular group meetings (approximately 3 hours each)
- two individual interview sessions (30 minutes each)
- a concluding group meeting (3 hours)

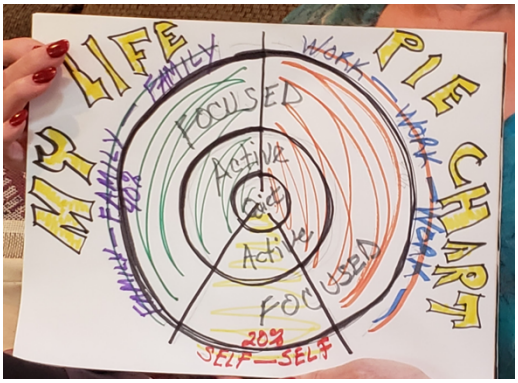
Date	Meeting Type	Meeting Goal
July 24, 2019 and August 1, 2019	***Orientation meeting*** (Participants chose between one of two options.)	• Learned about collaborative human inquiry. • Signed informed consent form.
August 20, 2019	***Initiation meeting***	• Generated norms/guidelines. • Engaged in relationship-building activities.
September 18, 2019	***Regular meeting #1***	***Research Cycle #1:*** • Reflected on research topic. • Generated research question(s). • Identified first action. <u>For homework:</u> • Engage in first action. • Be immersed in first action.
September 23-25, 2019	***Individual interview #1***	Discussed role/experience in the research process.
September 26-29, 2019	(No meeting scheduled)	Initiating researcher analyzed data to share at next meeting.
October 23, 2019	***Regular meeting #2***	***Research Cycle #1:*** • Shared/reflected on experience. • Identified themes.
October 24-27, 2019	(No meeting scheduled)	Initiating researcher analyzed data to share at next meeting.

November 13, 2019	***Regular meeting #3***	***Research Cycle #2 and 3:*** • Identified second action. • Engaged in second action. • Immersed in section action. • Shared/reflected on experience. • Identified third action. <u>For homework:</u> • Engage in third action. • Be immersed in third action.
November 14-17, 2019	(No meeting scheduled)	Initiating researcher analyzed data to share at next meeting.
December 2, 2019 to January 3, 2020	***Individual interview #2*** (Elsie's interview had to be scheduled after the concluding meeting.)	Discussed role/experience in the research process.
December 11, 2019	***Concluding meeting***	***Research Cycle # 3:*** • Shared/reflected on experience. • Identified themes. <u>For conclusion:</u> • Shared/reflected on overall experience. • Analyzed/interpreted/drew final conclusions.
December 12-20, 2019	(Meetings have concluded)	Initiating researcher analyzed/summarized data to begin reporting findings in the dissertation.

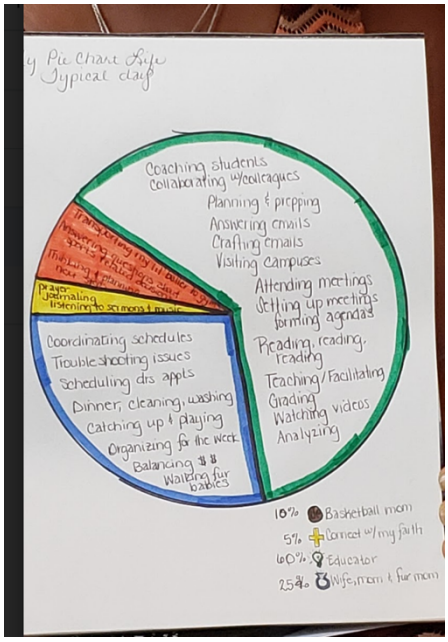
APPENDIX D

Participants' Pie Charts

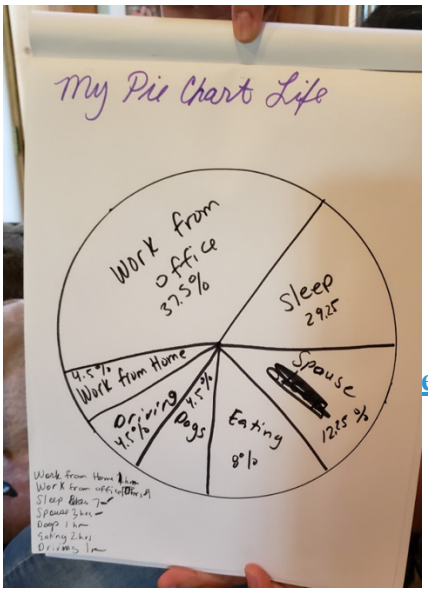
Elsie



Janice



Esme



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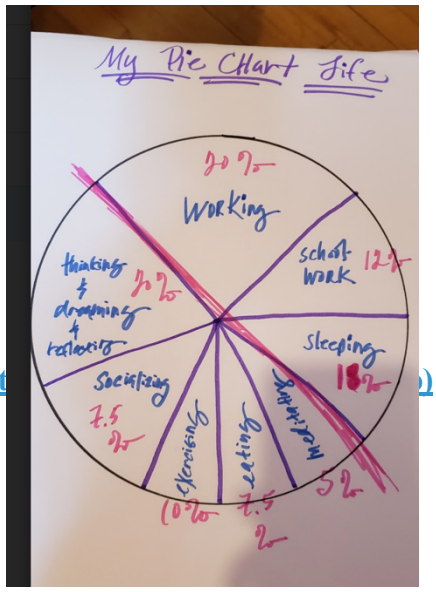

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APPENDIX E

Collaborative Human Inquiry Contract

Mutual Vulnerability:

Deepening Human Interconnectedness in Cross-Racial Relationships

Our Collaborative Human Contract describes what we all agree to do as we interact with each other during the research study.

"In order to approach and sustain this experience of cross-racial vulnerability, we agree to:

- stay engaged,
- speak our truth,
- experience discomfort, and
- expect and accept non- closure".

"Vulnerability is the birthplace of love, belonging, joy, courage, empathy, and creativity. It is the source of hope, empathy, accountability, and authenticity. If we want greater clarity in our purpose or deeper and more meaningful spiritual lives, vulnerability is the path."

— Brené Brown, Daring Greatly:

How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead

APPENDIX F

Meeting Agendas

Initiation Meeting – AGENDA (Setting the Stage)

Title of Study: Mutual Vulnerability: Deepening Human Interconnectedness in Cross-Racial Relationships

Thank you for your willingness to fully participate in this collaborative endeavor. I hope that by engaging authentically in this inquiry, you will be able to make sense of your world in more creative and empathic ways, as well as to act toward changing what you find might need to be transformed for the benefit of all those who inhabit our interconnected world.

6:00 pm – 7:00 pm:

- Welcoming Rituals
  - My Perfect Day
  - My Pie Chart Life
- Norms and/or Agreements
  - Chalkboard Splash (large/small/large)
  - Courageous Conversations Agreements
  - Collaborative Human Contract
  - Courageous Conversations Compass
- Reflection
  - Journaling Time
  - Meditation Time (8 min): Empowerment & Self-Love

7:00 pm – 8:00 pm:

- Relationship-Building Activities
  - Magazine Cover Story (highlight accomplishments) (homework for next time)
  - Quick Draw (share favorite child/adult memory)
  - Campfire Stories (describe an AHA moment)
- Reflection
  - Journaling Time
  - Meditation Time (6 min): Compassion

8:00 pm – 9:00 pm:

- Logistics
  - Schedule Meetings (three research cycles, concluding meeting, two interviews)
- Questions/Concerns
- For Next Time… (research questions, vulnerability activities)
- Optimistic Closure
  - Suit Up!

"Vulnerability is the birthplace of love, belonging, joy, courage, empathy, and creativity. It is the source of hope, empathy, accountability, and authenticity. If we want greater clarity in our purpose or deeper and more meaningful spiritual lives, vulnerability is the path."

— *Brené Brown, Daring Greatly:*

How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead

Research Meeting #1 – AGENDA for 9.18.19 (Aspiring into Action)

Title of Study: Mutual Vulnerability: Deepening Human Interconnectedness in Cross-Racial Relationships

Thank you for your willingness to fully participate in this collaborative endeavor. I hope that by engaging authentically in this inquiry, you will be able to make sense of your world in more creative and empathic ways, as well as to act toward changing what you find might need to be transformed for the benefit of all those who inhabit our interconnected world.

6:00 pm – 7:00 pm:

- Welcoming Ritual - Magazine Cover Story
- Agreements
  - Collaborative Human Inquiry - Contract
  - Courageous Conversations - Compass
- Collaborative Human Inquiry
  - Review of Methodology – Scavenger Hunt
  - Fourfold Way of Knowing – Graphic
- Research Study
  - Explore the Topic
  - Generate Research Question(s) – 4A Protocol
  - Explore Activities and Select Action #1
- Reflection
  - Journaling Time
  - Meditation Time (6 min): Compassion

7:00 pm – 7:15 pm: Dinner

7:15 pm – 8:45 pm:

- **Research Cycle #1:** ***Initial Reflection***
- **Research Cycle #1:** ***Action and Full Immersion*** (homework for next time)
- **Research Cycle #1:** ***Second Reflection*** (for next time)
- Reflection
  - Journaling Time

8:45 pm – 9:00 pm:

- For Next Time on October 23rd… **(Research Cycle #2)**
- Questions/Concerns
- Reminder of 1:1 Interviews
- Optimistic Closure – Six Word Memoir

"Vulnerability is the birthplace of love, belonging, joy, courage, empathy, and creativity. It is the source of hope, empathy, accountability, and authenticity. If we want greater clarity in our purpose or deeper and more meaningful spiritual lives, vulnerability is the path."

— *Brené Brown, Daring Greatly:*

How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead

Research Meeting #2 – AGENDA for 10.23.19 (A Tale of Two Tells)

Title of Study: Mutual Vulnerability: Deepening Human Interconnectedness in Cross-Racial Relationships

6:00 pm – 7:00 pm:

- Welcoming Ritual – *Empowerment Song*
- Review Agreements
  - Collaborative Human Inquiry - Contract
  - Courageous Conversations - Compass
- Review Collaborative Human Inquiry
  - Review of Methodology
  - Fourfold Way of Knowing (template)
  - **Review of Validity Strategies**
  - **Classification of Stories**
- Research Study
  - Review topic, research question, action #1
- Reflection
  - Journaling Time (general check-in)
  - Meditation Time (12 min): Blissful Relaxation

7:00 pm – 7:45 pm:

- **Research Cycle #1:** ***Action and Full Immersion***
- **Research Cycle #1:** ***Second Reflection***
- Reflection
  - Journaling Time (special inquiry skills)

7:45 pm – 8:45 pm:

- **Research Cycle #2:** ***Action and Full Immersion*** (for next time)
- **Research Cycle #2:** ***Second Reflection*** (for next time)
- Reflection
  - Journaling Time (special inquiry skills)

8:45 pm – 9:00 pm:

- For Next Time on November 13th… **(Research Cycle #3)**
- Questions/Concerns
- Reminder of 1:1 Interviews
- Optimistic Closure – *Pandora Playlist*

"Vulnerability is the birthplace of love, belonging, joy, courage, empathy, and creativity. It is the source of hope, empathy, accountability, and authenticity. If we want greater clarity in our purpose or deeper and more meaningful spiritual lives, vulnerability is the path."

— *Brené Brown, Daring Greatly:*

How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead

Research Meeting #3 – AGENDA for 11.13.19 (Finishing our own Sentences)

Title of Study: Mutual Vulnerability: Deepening Human Interconnectedness in Cross-Racial Relationships

6:00 pm – 6:30 pm:

- Welcoming Ritual – *I'm curious about…*
- Review Agreements
  - Collaborative Human Inquiry - Contract
  - Courageous Conversations - Compass
- Review Collaborative Human Inquiry
  - Review of Methodology
  - Fourfold Way of Knowing
  - Review of Validity Strategies
- Reflection
  - Meditation Time (5 min): Serotonin Release Alpha Waves
  - Journaling Time (post gallery walk)

6:30 pm – 8:00 pm:

- **Research Cycle #1:** ***Second Reflection***
- Research Study
  - Review topic, research questions, action #1 data
  - Decide on action #2
- **Research Cycle #2:** ***Action and Full Immersion***
- Reflection
  - Journaling Time (special inquiry skills)
- **Research Cycle #2:** ***Second Reflection*** (for next time)

8:00 pm – 8:45 pm:

- Research Study
  - Review topic, research questions, action #2 data
  - Decide on action #3
- **HOMEWORK: Research Cycle #3:** ***Action and Full Immersion***

8:45 pm – 9:00 pm:

- For Next Time on December 11th:
  - Continue with **Research Cycle #3: *Second Reflection***
  - Concluding Patterns/Trends/Themes
- Questions/Concerns
- Reminder of 1:1 Interviews
- Optimistic Closure – *Glows & Grows*

"Vulnerability is the birthplace of love, belonging, joy, courage, empathy, and creativity. It is the source of hope, empathy, accountability, and authenticity. If we want greater clarity in our purpose or deeper and more meaningful spiritual lives, vulnerability is the path."

— *Brené Brown, Daring Greatly:*

How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead

Concluding Meeting – AGENDA for 12.11.19 (Hidden in Plain Sight)

Title of Study: Mutual Vulnerability: Deepening Human Interconnectedness in Cross-Racial Relationships

6:00 pm – 6:30 pm:

- Welcoming Ritual – *If this experience was a recipe, what would be 5 main ingredients?*
- Review Agreements
  - Collaborative Human Inquiry - Contract
  - Courageous Conversations - Compass
- Review Collaborative Human Inquiry
  - Review of Methodology: Fourfold Way of Knowing, Validity Strategies
- Co-Inquirer Portrait: **https://tinyurl.com/coinquirers2019**
- Journaling Time (*redo two questions*)

6:30 pm – 7:00 pm:

- **Research Cycle #2: *Second Reflection***
  - Review action #2 data – themes, possible working theories
  - Questions:
    - Consider your 11 responses, which themes did they connect with?
    - Consider your 11 responses, which quadrant of the compass showed up most for you? How was this influenced by the sentence stem?
    - Consider your initial/final commitment responses, how do they compare? How do you explain the evolution of that commitment?
- Research Study
  - Review topic, research questions, action #2 data
  - Revisit action #3

7:00 pm – 8:30 pm:

- **Research Cycle #3: *Action and Full Immersion***
  - Share scenarios of hidden in plain sight racist assumptions
  - Identify themes
- **Research Cycle #3: *Second Reflection***
  - Examine action #3 data with fourfold way of knowing

    - Compare with action #1 and action #2 data
    - Any new themes?
- Reflection
    - Journaling Time (Special Inquiry Skills)

8:30 pm – 9:00 pm:

- Concluding Patterns/Trends/Themes
    - Review action 1, 2, and 3 data
    - How do we know what we think we know?
    - Any overarching themes?
    - Did we answer the research questions?
- Reflection
    - Journaling Time (Creative Conclusions)
        - Feeling
        - Question
        - Lesson
        - Advice
        - Cliffhanger
- Next Steps
    - Theory of Action?
- Optimistic Closure – *To show how this experience has impacted you, create a portrait of your vulnerability journey before/after.*

From…	**…to…**

- Final Reflection
    - Meditation Time (5 min): For Insight and Clarity

APPENDIX G

What is Collaborative Human Inquiry?

Title of Study: Mutual Vulnerability: Deepening Human Interconnectedness in Cross-Racial Relationships

Context:

Collaborative human inquiry is inspired by co-operative inquiry (Heron, 1996) and collaborative inquiry (Bray, Lee, Smith & Yorks, 2000). It fosters research that is not merely conducted on people, or for people, but *with* people.

Elements:

- Person-centered approach with participants actively engaged
- Participative knowing acknowledges that data generated from individual experiences is co-constructed via interactions with others
- Human sensibilities are welcome and honored
- Interplay between *reflection* (making sense of the experience) and *action* (the experience itself)
- Transformative potential where individuals change their way of doing or being as a result of fourfold way of knowing
- Attention given to validity of the knowledge gained through specific procedures

Three Strands:

- Inquiry strand – understanding of the methodology
- Collaboration strand – contribution to the decision-making process and authentic collaboration
- Interpersonal strand – emotional states are tended to and resulting tension accepted as a potential source for growth and transformation

Research Cycles:

Inspired by Heron (1996), each inquiry cycle is comprised of four stages: initial reflection, action, full immersion, and second reflection.

- Initial reflection - work together to decide on the parameters of the inquiry approach, and develop a plan for the action stage to follow
- Action - engage in some action that will inform the chosen focus for that particular inquiry cycle
    - *group process inside inquiry* - the group remains intact as they engage in the action stage of each research cycle
    - *group-based inside inquiry* - the group can engage in action, such as individually, in pairs, or in smaller groups
- Full immersion - entrenched in the experiences of the action stage and are developing inquiry skills
- Second reflection - share the data produced from the action stage; extract possible themes, consider how this new knowledge informs the selected focus of the inquiry; this leads to the planning of the next research cycle and action stage

Special Inquiry Skills:

Heron believes these are skills that you will develop as you participate in the inquiry. So it is not a question of whether you are a master of these skills already, but whether you are willing to develop them further.

- Being present – acting with empathy as we engage in our experiences and are tuned in to the experiences of others
- Emotional competence – managing emotions in a way that is conducive to the purpose of the study and which respects the health of the collective as well as the individual
- Bracketing – being aware of our perceptions and the labels or constructs embedded in them that may hinder our imagining of what might be

Fourfold Way of Knowing:

Our inquiry has the potential to be transformative where we change our way of relating to others in the world.

- Experiential knowing - refers to our encounters with others through perception and empathy
- Presentational knowing - communicated in a variety of expressive ways such as storytelling, poetry, metaphor or visual arts
- Propositional knowing - refers to the language of theories or concepts
- Practical knowing - considered the ultimate form of knowledge since it connotes a change in practice as a result of the learning that transpires

**Valid knowledge is the congruence between these four dimensions of knowing.*

Validity Procedures:

During the reflection stages, it is important that we give attention to these procedures to validate the knowledge we co-construct together. This is what gives validity to our inquiry findings as we reflect while collecting and analyzing our data.

- Research cycling – three rounds of research cycles with reflection and action informing and refining each other increase validity
- Reflection and action balance – ensuring that there is not too much reflection and too little action/experience, or vice versa
- Managing distortions of thinking –participants assume the role of devil's advocate with each other to ensure that there is congruence across the four multiple ways of knowing
- Authentic collaboration – each participant engages fully, and is heard and influential in the decision-making process

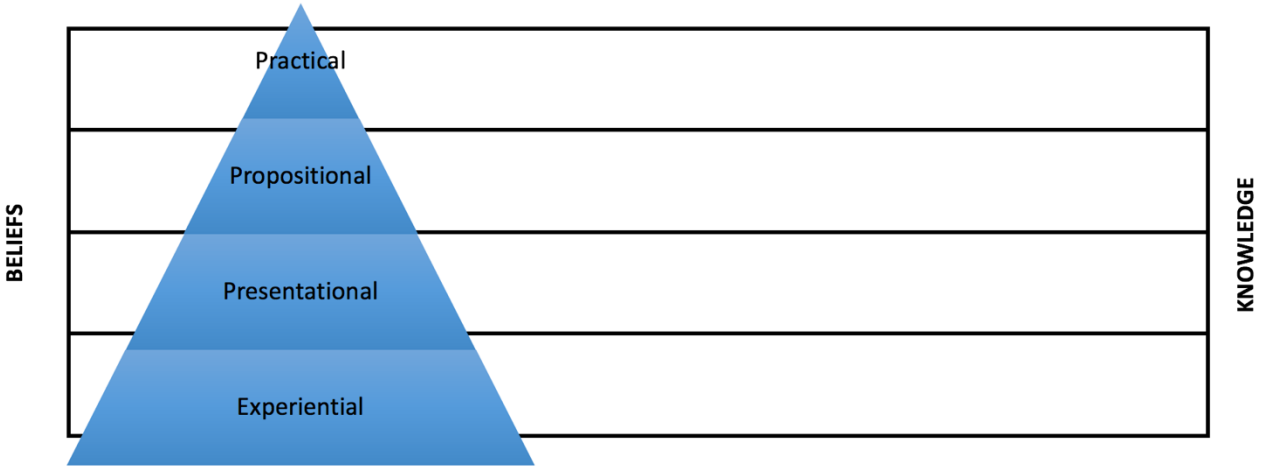
APPENDIX H

Fourfold Way of Knowing: (Heron, 1996)

Our inquiry has the potential to be transformative where we change our way of relating to others in the world.

- Experiential knowing - refers to our encounters with others through perception and empathy
- Presentational knowing - communicated in a variety of expressive ways such as storytelling, poetry, metaphor or visual arts
- Propositional knowing - refers to the language of theories or concepts
- Practical knowing - considered the ultimate form of knowledge since it connotes a change in practice as a result of the learning that transpires

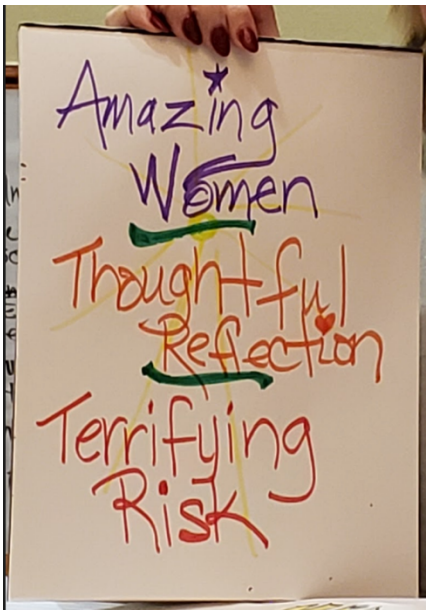
**Valid knowledge is the congruence between these four dimensions of knowing.*



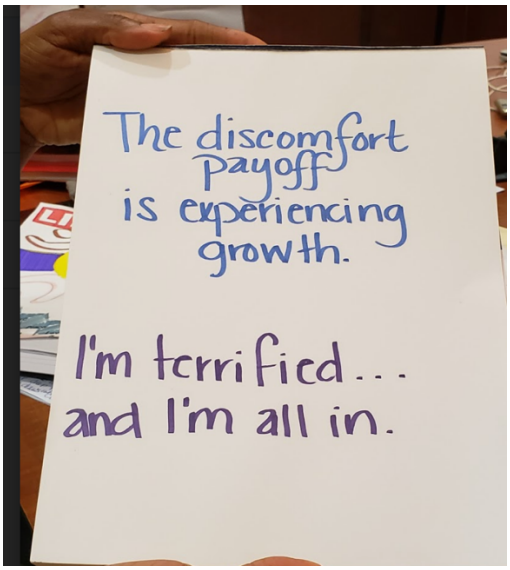
APPENDIX I

Participants' Six-Word Memoirs

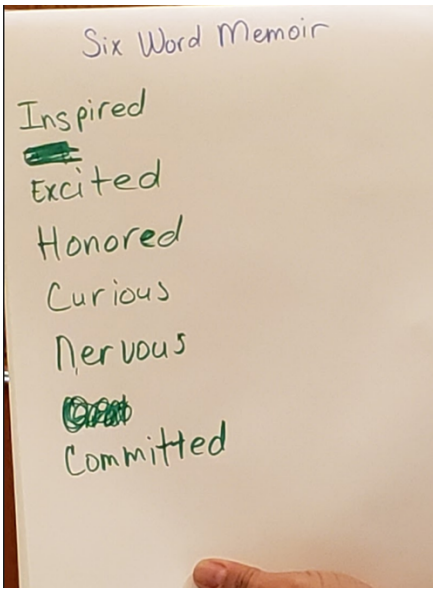
Elsie



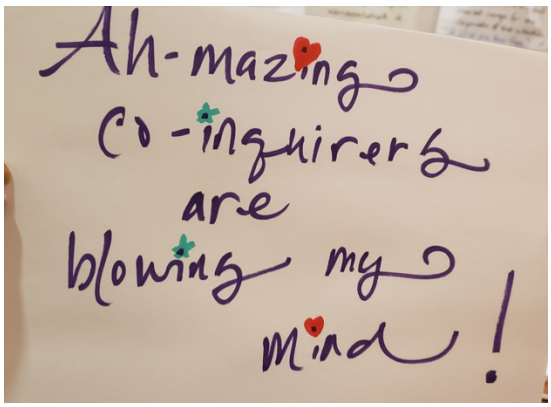
Janice



Esme



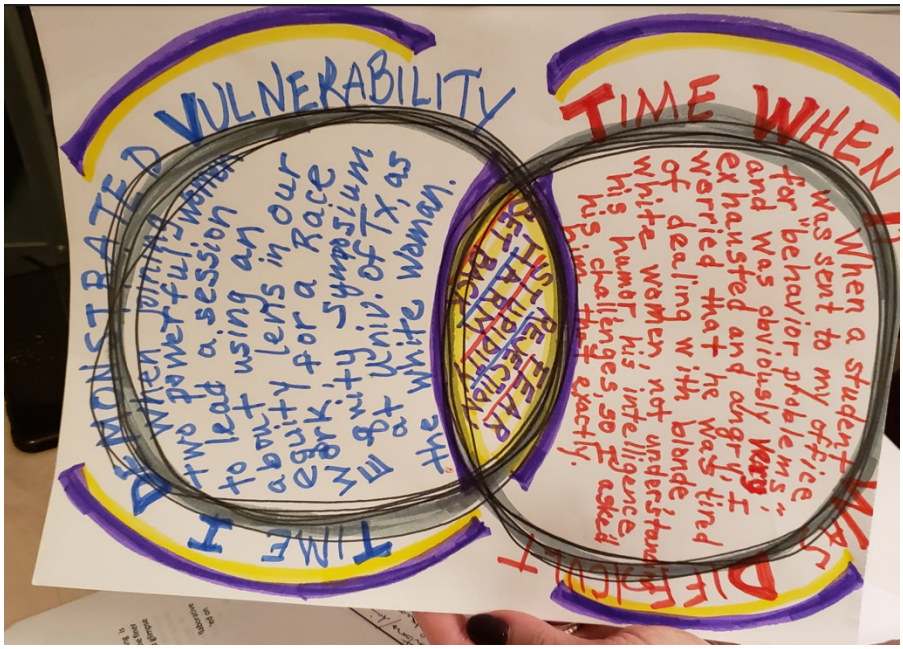
Thymai



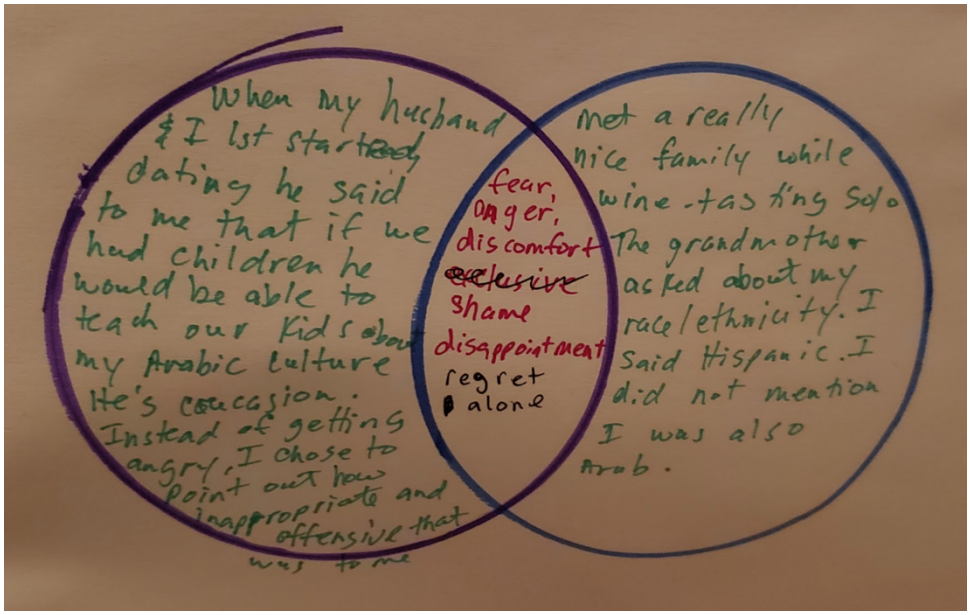
APPENDIX J

Participants' Venn Story Diagrams

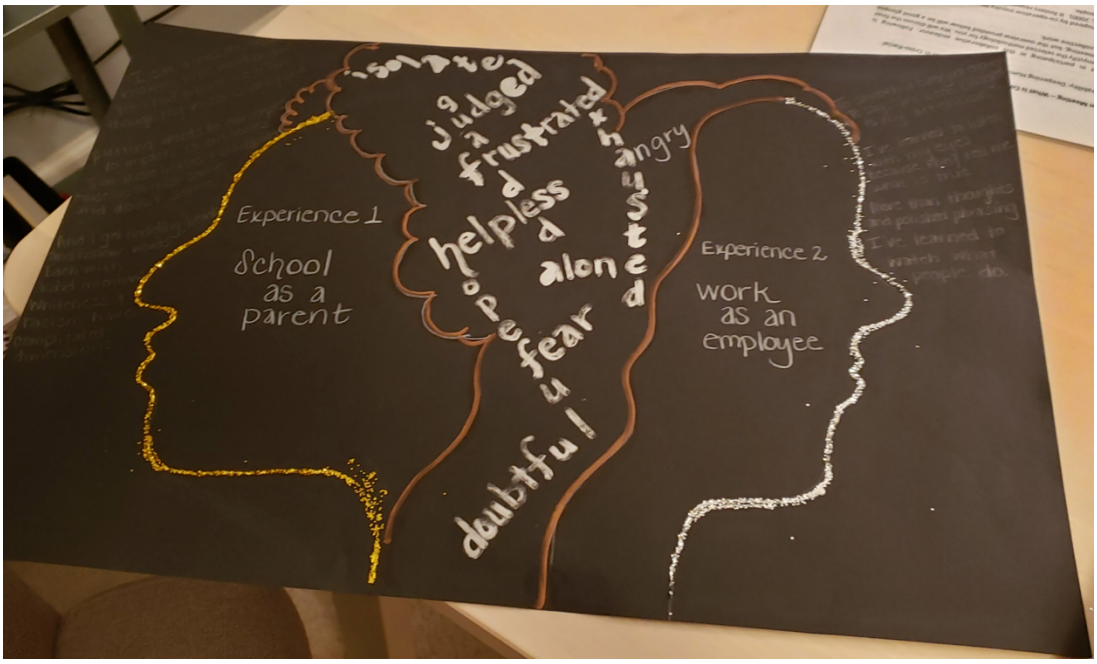
Elsie



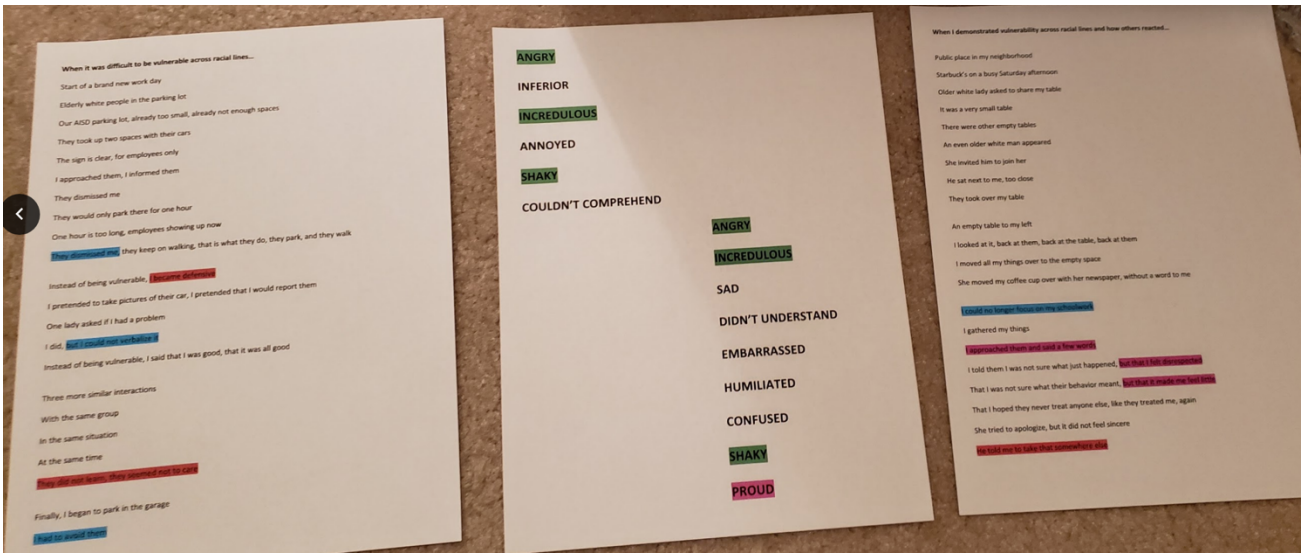
Esme



Janice

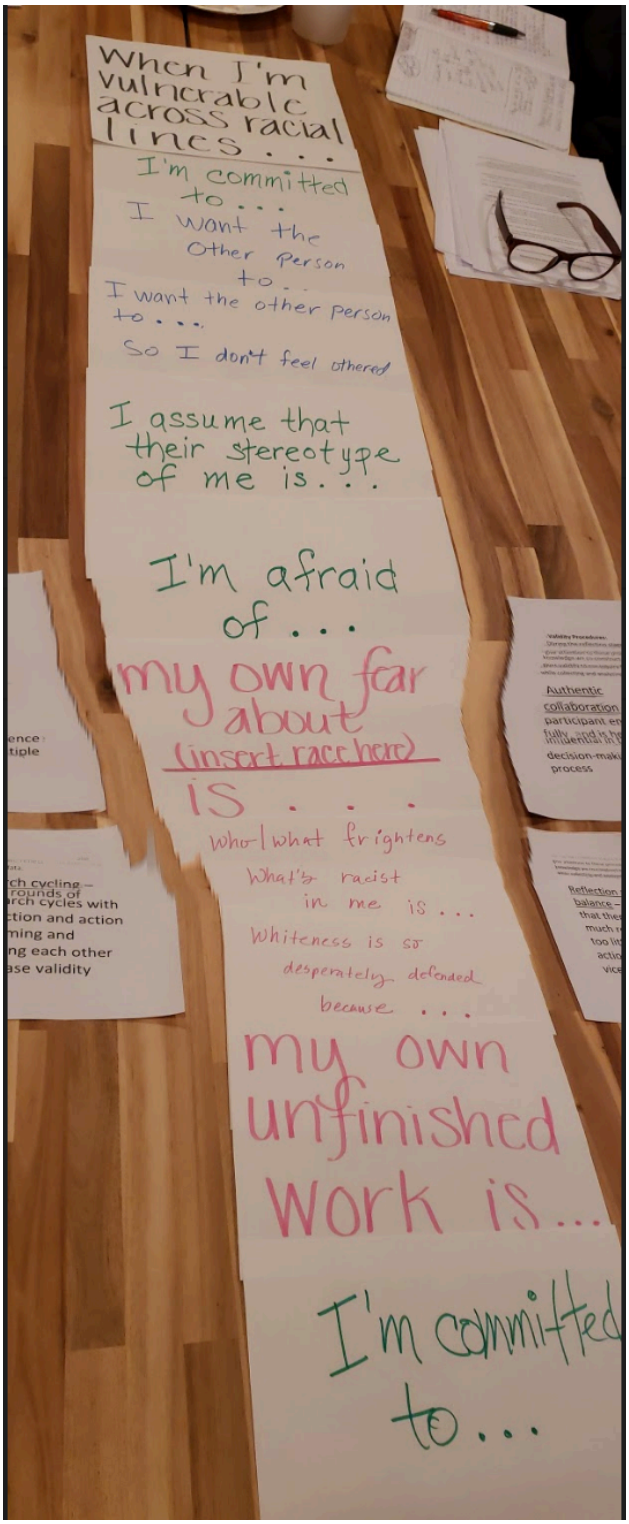


Thymai



APPENDIX K

Sentence Stems



APPENDIX L

Sentence Stem Summary of Responses

When I'm vulnerable across racial lines,				
	Thymai	Janice	Elsie	Esme
I'm committed to…	being genuine	saying what I genuinely think	dismantling my Whiteness	being patient with others, and seeing it as an opportunity to connect
COMPASS	*FEELING*	*FEELING*	*FEELING*	*FEELING*
I want the other person to…	also be vulnerable and genuine	put themselves in my shoes	feel that I'm genuinely listening and learning	be receptive and understanding
COMPASS	*THINKING*	*BELIEVING*	*BELIEVING*	*THINKING*
I want the other person to…so that I don't feel othered	see themselves in me	hear me as if I were a White person	see me beyond my Whiteness	value me as much as a White woman would be valued
COMPASS	*BELIEVING*	*FEELING*	*FEELING*	*FEELING*
I assume that their stereotype of me is…	that I am smart and that I don't have any difficulties or challenges	that I can't add value, that I'm unintelligent, and that my responses are easily dismissed	that I'm a silly, blonde White woman who can't see beyond Whiteness	that I'm out of place
COMPASS	*THINKING*	*THINKING*	*FEELING*	*BELIEVING*
I'm afraid of…	falling apart, seeming weak, and confirming	the information, feelings, thoughts, fears that I share will	saying something stupid without realizing it, and	being dismissed

	their opinion that I'm inferior	be weaponized and used against me	hurting someone (because ?)	
COMPASS	*FEELING*	*BELIEVING*	*FEELING*	*FEELING*
My own fear about …(insert race) is …	White people, is that I will never be good enough to be considered their equal	White people, is that they're not interested in sharing power	people of color, is that they're done with me and don't see value or potential in working together	my own race, Mexican and Arab, is that I'm less than for not being exactly what I'm supposed to be; and my own fear about the White race is that I also don't fit perceived standards of how I should be
COMPASS	*FEELING/ACTING*	*ACTING*	*BELIEVING*	*BELIEVING*
Who or what frightens me is…	because I don't look like the dominant culture, because I wasn't born here, that I'll never be accepted, I'll never feel I have the right to be here in this country, and I'll always have to try to prove myself, that I do deserve to be here	who frightens me, are people who are silent, because I fear that again, that my vulnerability will be weaponized and used to harm me, and that they are not invested, or there's no urgency to change the status quo	what frightens me the most, is that it's the dim future for our next generation without some kind of change	what frightens me is being devalued and dismissed, and like, what I bring to the table doesn't hold as much weight
COMPASS	*THINKING*	*FEELING*	*THINKING*	*BELIEVING*
What's racist in me is…	when I'm in a room with other people of color, I feel at ease; when I'm in a room with only White people,	that I feel that my contribution has to measure up against the White standard, and when other people of color	everything, that continues to leave the layers unpeeled or else I sit in it	feeling uncomfortable when I'm the darkest person in the room in social settings, or just out and about, and I

	I'm making a lot of assumptions about how they perceive me because of my fear of feeling inferior to them	speak, I'm afraid that they're going to say something that devalues us, in the eyes of other White people		tend to feel more comfortable when my husband's with me
COMPASS	*ACTING*	*ACTING*	*ACTING*	*ACTING*
Whiteness is so desperately defended because…	of a fear that an inferior group of people would take over, and the belief that that would be a bad thing	I bought into the lie that it is the standard by which everything else is measured so much so that I don't even see it sometimes, as a person of color	all our structures and institutions historically have been dominated to keep Whiteness in a power position, wrongly, inequitably	of lack of self-awareness in others and in myself
COMPASS	*THINKING*	*THINKING*	*THINKING/BELIEVING*	*THINKING*
My own unfinished work is…	when interacting with a White person, to face the fear that automatically surfaces, or rises within me	to allow space for White people who are a part of this work and trying to make a difference	continually wearing my White privileged glasses, and understanding how to take them on and off and unpeel the layers so that I can be part of that change and a shift	to not shy away and to power through the discomfort so that I can walk away being proud of myself
COMPASS	*BELIEVING/FEELING*	*ACTING*	*BELIEVING*	*FEELING*
I'm committed to…	playing less the victim and advocating more for myself and others	working on me first, and speaking my truth regardless, and not worrying about how it	listening more, unpacking crap, walking into the fire, and dismantling as much as I can, in	honoring myself, and others, in hopes of getting to a better place, not just for myself, but for the people in my life

		lands on other people	an inequitable power dynamic	
COMPASS	*ACTING*	*BELIEVING*	*BELIEVING*	*ACTING*

APPENDIX M

Cross-racial Scenarios

Elsie:

- Watching commercials on TV, they show White people as successful and people of color as needing help, repeatedly.
- NPR radio shows, National Public Radio, touted as the elite radio shows and the discussions, the situations for almost all of the shows are devoid of any culture and very White-centric.
- I feel like there's an arrogance of White drivers. I'm sorry, but I don't know if that makes sense.
- A situation I was in, the bank where our retail does business assumes that any question or request that I make needs no question. If I send someone else who works with me, who is a person of color, then I'll get a call.
- Recently the ease with which I walk through the airport as a White woman, and what I see all around me with the stopping of people of color repeatedly, for multiple things at the airport, that never happens to me.

Esme:

- Latino person mistaken for custodian.
- White veterinarian asks receptionist if the Latino customer speaks English.
- Latina stepmother mistaken for nanny when picking up her White stepson from school.
- White woman only carries her gun on her hip when visiting an area with a high population of Sudanese immigrants. She normally carries it in her purse.
- Black man looking for a new pet at the shelter and White volunteer comments that the customer is probably looking for a pit-bull to use as a fighting dog.

Janice:

- Lawn ornaments depict White people; I can’t purchase those (for Christmas) that reflect my identity
- Make-up at Target: while shopping for make-up my daughters noticed that only the darker options were locked/secured
- Player of the game / Trophies: the images are always White people; my daughter has numerous medals and trophies from track and basketball and ALL of the images are White people
- Coloring Books at restaurants always depict White people

- Family Feud and other game shows project responses that are from the White perspective; they should say, “we asked 100 White people for this responses”
- Hallmark movies are about White families
- Sportscasters ALWAYS have one White person as the lead commentator, and who has rarely even played the sport
- Grocery store options are different in neighborhoods of POC; I can’t buy Hagen Daas ice cream at the HEB closest to my neighborhood (Springdale versus Mueller); this will change as more White people move in
- My children and children of color rarely get called on in math classes or receive challenging questions like their White peers in other classes
- Black children are typically not identified as GT. Ever.

Thymai

- So, when you see someone that's not White, "Hey, where were you born?" Because they couldn't have been born in the United States.
- "Hey we're having a Diversity Fair, let's put a flyer together. Yeah, go get a graphic, a clip-art of fortune cookies and put that on there."
- Placing Asian students in advanced math or science classes.
- Telling a Black person how articulate they are. "You're so articulate."
- Declaring that the American dream is possible if everyone just worked harder.
- Not taking the time to learn to say someone's name properly if it's not a traditional White name, or arguing about how to say your name.
- Labeling one person as being like all others in their group. "You people," "You people are so nice."
- Having low expectations. Low academic expectations of students of color.
- When a fight or an argument erupts between a White person and a person of color, the person of color is the one questioned
- Saying to someone, "You're acting really White."

APPENDIX N

Semi-structured Interview Guide

Title of Study: Mutual Vulnerability: Deepening Human Interconnectedness in Cross-Racial Relationships

During the two 30-minute semi-structured interviews, we will be able to address any of the following topics according to participant needs and wishes.

1. How would you describe your experience with this study thus far?

2. What are your feelings about how vulnerability is being explored in the group space?

3. Can you describe your comfort level with using the collaborative human inquiry process?

4. Are you able to share the positive and any negative changes that participating in the study has created for you?

5. What else would you like to share with me?

6. What are your hopes for the last meeting? (added for the second round of interviews)

The following probing questions will be utilized as appropriate.

Can you tell me more about…?

What do you mean when you say…?

APPENDIX O

Worksheet for Self-Awareness

When interacting in a relationship with someone from another race or ethnicity, one can ask themselves the following questions to become more self-aware of their thoughts and attitudes to ensure their actions are generative and inclusive, and of course, vulnerable.

- *How can I listen better when individuals from a different race or ethnicity as me are speaking?* ***In order to be vulnerable when listening, I must…***

- *How can I speak my truth, without hurting those from other races or ethnicities?* ***In order to be vulnerable when speaking, I must…***

- *How can I dig deeper into my thoughts and attitudes about individuals from other races or ethnicities to discover my own implicit biases?* ***In order to be vulnerable when reflecting, I must…***

- *How can I help dismantle racism when I experience it or witness it within my sphere of influence?* ***In order to be vulnerable when disrupting, I must…***

- *How can I play less the victim and take an active stance to be inclusive of all races or ethnicities?* ***In order to be vulnerable when acting, I must …***

- *How can I honor both myself and others from different races or ethnicities to act in ways that allow us to feel more interconnected with one another?* ***In order to be vulnerable and feel more connected across racial lines, I must…***

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