

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: **WOKE LIKE ME: EXPERIENCES AND EXPECTATIONS OF WOKENESS AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS**

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Woke, generally referring to awareness of social issues, has become commonplace language in American popular and political cultures. The lengthy and culturally embedded history of *wokeness*, and its implications for higher education reveal that this is not merely a fad. Using the framework of critical consciousness and intersectionality, the purpose of this thesis is to gain an understanding of the meaning of woke as understood by college students who identify as such, and to explore associated intra-group expectations and experiences. Five themes emerged describing how participants came to understand wokeness as a series of expectations through an internal process heavily facilitated by engagement with others. Students were willing to engage outside of their woke communities, but only so far, and often held different expectations for themselves than others.

WOKE LIKE ME: EXPERIENCES AND EXPECTATIONS OF WOKENESS
AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS

by

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Table of Contents

Thanks & Acknowledgements	ii
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
The Significance of Woke	2
Researcher Narrative.....	5
Problem Statement	9
Purpose of the Study	13
Chapter 2: Literature Review	15
Woke: What We Know.....	16
Allyship.....	23
Social Justice Awareness, Interest, and Attitudes.....	28
Activism.....	30
Critical Consciousness	34
Themes and Gaps in the Literature	34
Conceptual Framework.....	36
Chapter 3: Methodology	45
Epistemological Approach: Critical Constructivism	45
Research Design: Narrative Inquiry.....	48
Data Analysis and Coding	56
Researcher Relationality and Social Location	58
Trustworthiness.....	60
Bounding the Study.....	61
Summary.....	62
Chapter 4: Findings	64
How do Students Make Sense of Wokeness?.....	64
How do Students Perceive the Expectations of Wokeness in Relation to their Woke Peers?	78
Summary	87
Discussion.....	89
Implications for Research	94
Implications for Practice.....	96
Summary of the Study	99
Concluding Thoughts.....	100
Appendices	102
Appendix A.....	102
Appendix B.....	103
Appendix C.....	104
Appendix D.....	105
Appendix E	106
Appendix F.....	109
References	111

Chapter 1: Introduction

“Can ‘Discovery’ Make ‘Star Trek’ The Most Woke Show on TV Again?” (Vary, 2017), “What Woke America And Great America Can Learn From Each Other” (Giridharadas, 2018), and “Can We Talk About How Woke Matt McGorry Was In 2015?” (Blackmon, 2015). These headlines hail from across a variety of recent publications, representing discussions ranging from the depiction of underrepresented identities in television or celebrity social awareness to the state of cross-ideological debate in the United States under the Trump administration. What these articles, think pieces, and essays have in common is an invocation of the word, or concept, of *woke* and a bend towards discussing critical politics. How the word *woke* is used in this way begs the question: what is meant by this contemporary evolution of *woke*? Clearly, the meaning transcends the literal meaning of being physically awake.

In recent years, the term *woke* has become commonplace in youth, popular, and political cultures alike (Pulliam-Moore, 2016). Across popular culture through music, social media, red carpet fashion, protests, journalism and beyond, it is increasingly implicitly expected that consumers of the English language understand the nonliteral meaning of *woke*. In a general sense, *wokeness* refers to an awareness of social issues. According to Urban Dictionary, a crowdsourced dictionary for slang or other informal language, *woke* “means being aware.. [sic] Knowing whats [sic] going on in the community (relating to Racism and Social Injustice)” (indigo.child, 2015). Indeed, one can hardly engage in political discussion, debate, action, or commentary without hearing reference to staying or being *woke*. In my experience as

a student affairs professional, this has become especially true among emerging adults in the United States, particularly those engaged in social activism. Wokeness has even begun to appear in the literature, though its meaning and the ensuing cultural implications are rarely explicated or explored (Aikin, 2018; Ashlee, Zamora, & Karikiri, 2017; Brown, 2018; Doyle, 2018; Field, 2018). Additionally, to be woke is increasingly being used as an adjective almost on par with a kind of identity. See recent works such as “Becoming A Sailor: A (Critical) Analytic Autoethnographic Account of Navigating Tensions as a ‘Woke’ White Woman Working for Racial Justice,” a dissertation by Doyle (2018), and Ashlee, Zamora, and Karikiri’s (2017) “We Are Woke: A Collaborative Critical Autoethnography of Three ‘Womxn’ of Color Graduate Students in Higher Education.” This trend is also notably illustrated as relevant to the field of student affairs by the theming of the 2018 Association for the Study of Higher Education annual conference as “Envisioning the Woke Academy.” It is unclear as of now if woke is a kind of slang or shorthand, a new nuanced addition to the English language, or an emerging conceptual paradigm. Where did woke come from, what does it mean, and how are students navigating it? In the following chapter I discuss the significance of wokeness, its relevance to higher education, identify the problem this study seeks to address, as well as my own experience of wokeness as the researcher.

The Significance of Woke

Journalist Charles Pulliam-Moore (2016) identified wokeness as a concept which originated in “socially-minded, black social media” (para. 1) but has spread into usage across mainstream communities. The earliest known reference to woke is

traceable to William Melvin Kelley's 1962 *New York Times* essay entitled "If You're Woke You Dig It; No mickey mouse can be expected to follow today's Negro idiom without a hip assist. If You're Woke You Dig It," wherein, ironically, he discussed the reinvention of Black slang by Black Americans in response to its appropriation by white¹ people. Woke in this context indicated someone who was up-to-date or well-informed and was used in a manner which assumed that Black communities reading the article, and perhaps members of other communities as well, would understand that this is the case. Pre-twenty-first century, the word makes some additional appearances, though with different context, most notably in Barry Beckham's 1972 play *Garvey Lives!*. Referring to Marcus Garvey, the Jamaican Pan-African and Black nationalist advocate active in the early twentieth century, one of Beckham's African American characters explains: "I been sleeping all my life. And now that Mr. Garvey done woke me up, I'm gon' stay woke. And I'm gon' help him wake up other black folk" (p. 1). Here woke takes on a more explicitly political meaning but remains generally consistent with Kelley's (1962) interpretation.

The source material for woke's frequent modern usage, however, traces not quite so far back. In 2008, decades after Kelley (1962) and Beckham (1972), the Soul and R&B musical artist Erykah Badu released a track titled *Master Teacher* on which she collaborated with artists Georgia Muldrow and Bilal Oliver. The song included the chorus refrain: "What if it were no niggas/ Only master teachers?/ I stay woke" (Badu, 2008). This, the first significant mainstream usage of the word woke, initially

¹ Although APA style calls for the capitalization of "White" to signify its use in a racial context, I elect not to do so as an act of resistance against white supremacy in the academy and our culture. By not capitalizing white I emphasize its existence as socially constructed and resist the elevation of its status.

made little impact on popular culture and was in fact originally met with confusion from critics and listeners alike (Pulliam-Moore, 2016). Few were able to discern what exactly Badu meant until later. While woke's nonliteral meaning would slowly gain momentum in the intervening years, it was not until 2012 that it exploded in mainstream popularity (Pulliam-Moore, 2016).

On February 26, 2012, 17-year-old Trayvon Martin was shot and killed by George Zimmerman, a man whose not guilty verdict sparked public outrage across the world and led to the formation of the Black Lives Matter movement (Pulliam-Moore, 2016). That same year, Badu (2012) herself tweeted the following in solidarity with the imprisoned feminist Russian rock group Pussy Riot: "Truth requires no belief. Stay Woke. Watch closely. #FreePussyRiot." This colloquial usage, typically meaning "remaining vigilant about social issues" (Pulliam-Moore, 2016, para. 18) immediately sprung into widespread usage outside the Black community, right alongside the increased prominence of the Black Lives Matter movement.

I include this brief history to locate this research within a longstanding tradition of and appropriation of wokeness, and to emphasize the importance of recognizing the origin of woke as having deep roots in Black American culture and anti-racist resistance. As perhaps foreshadowed by Kelley (1962), the popular use of wokeness has transcended the Black community and, according to some, been co-opted by dominant communities. At the same time, it continues to serve as a powerful tool and reminder for Black and other minoritized communities to remain conscious of racial struggles (Pulliam-Moore, 2016). Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, there is little

academic literature addressing the meaning of wokeness, let alone how it is interpreted and enacted by college students. It is therefore essential that I document this history early in this project to acknowledge the specific struggle and oppression from which wokeness emerged. I do so in an effort to minimize the effect this work could have in further co-opting the Black experience through dominant culture in the United States of America, as is so often the case.

Researcher Narrative

As a researcher, I have a profound interest in discovering more about the complex meanings and implications of wokeness, particularly on college campuses. This interest stems from several places, including parts of my personal and professional history which I share in this section. Additionally, it would be insincere and unethical to insist that my position as a researcher is one of objectivity and free from bias. While I seek to expand my knowledge and explore how others interact with wokeness, I come to this space with a personal understanding of wokeness, which I share below.

I understand wokeness as a kind of subversive brand, that to identify one's self as woke is to inherently orient oneself in opposition to dominant narratives and structures of power. Awareness alone does not describe the phenomenon, for one can be aware of systems of power and oppression and accept, or even choose to further or leverage them for personal gain. In a way, woke feels like a direct challenge to hegemony, the ways in which systems of power are maintained through the unquestioning acceptance of its participants. Woke, to me, describes a radical revolutionary network, running between communities and individuals – like a neural

network. To be woke often leads to the alignment of oneself with countless others who also seek to do the work to shed their role in maintaining hegemonic power structures. Unlike political ideologies such as anarchism or socialism, I believe that wokeness has no common answer or solution, perhaps not even a common cause. Rather, wokeness unites by means of common enemy and the dedication to dismantling oppressive structures – what they are to be replaced with is not dictated by wokeness. Of course, this is only my personal idea of wokeness, but it is one which brings me great comfort in difficult times, particularly those in which I am likely to give into despair or, more likely to believe there is no end to the cycle of oppression than in the power of people and the eventual victory of justice over power. For me, to be woke is to feel invisible community with others who too seek to challenge the hegemony, which dictates so much of our lives.

Prior to conceptualizing this project, I had not thought deeply about my own understanding of woke, where those ideas stemmed from, and why I believed them. Certainly, my academic experiences and exposure to critical theory have contributed tremendously to my ability to articulate this, but I believe that the ideas existed within me before I had the words to express them. Despite this, as my personal history and experience with wokeness illustrates, I believe there are ways wokeness can be expressed, or used, which run contrary to these beliefs of mine. This project is partially motivated by a desire to understand the greater ways wokeness effects our lives, positively and/or negatively.

I was drawn to the field of student affairs as the result of my undergraduate experience of awakening to social justice and realities of inequity. Woke was not a

commonly used term in mainstream culture at that time; however, in retrospect, I suspect I would have considered myself woke as a student. This awakening occurred both in and out of the classroom, and as a result, I naturally began to see the affects of privilege and oppression on my everyday life – which at that time was on a college campus. As a student, I saw how dimensions of my institution alienated or disadvantaged different social groups, including groups with which I identified. For example, I was frustrated by the limited funding for and priority of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Queer (LGBTQ+) student resources on my Catholic campus and what I perceived as the voyeuristic nature of heavily publicized service learning trips to Africa. I believe that, at the time, my pseudo-woke identity grew from the comparison of myself to my peers – many of whom did not engage with social justice concerns or questions of power and privilege on a regular basis, if at all. In some ways, I felt superior, as if I had reached a higher level of being that those other students were unable or unwilling to achieve. On the other hand, this was a demoralizing and frustrating experience. In fact, I distinctly remember sitting in a feminist theory course, populated by no more than nine students, filled with anger over the reality that only those of us who opted into the gender studies program would be asked to learn about systems of privilege and the theories which have evolved to describe them as part of our academic requirements. This frustration motivated me to continue my education and contribute to the betterment of college environments, where I hoped I could influence students beyond one-on-one interaction and work to address those gaps I perceived.

The way I understand systems of power and privilege as well as identity

politics, particularly as they exist on campuses, has certainly developed since then – expanding in some ways, developing nuance in others. I no longer believe myself to be superior in some way because of my critical consciousness. I could attribute this to maturation, my identity development process, or my continued academic education, though I have begun to wonder if there is an inherent development process in social justice awareness, or wokeness, itself.

Later, as a professional in a social justice center on a small campus, I encountered many students who reminded me of myself during my first critical awakening: passionate, sometimes defiant, and determined to make a difference – whether through student activism, academic work, peer education, or some other means. As a professional, however, I noticed other trends among these students which concerned me, including a low tolerance for what I called *perceived ideological impurity*, participation in identity fetishization or “oppression Olympics” (Hancock, 2011, p. 4), and a tendency to wield wokeness as a social weapon. In an extreme example I faced as a professional, which deeply affected my approach to working with woke students, two well-known and prominent members of the student activist community engaged in a social conflict so personally damaging that it resulted in one of the students making a suicide attempt and eventually taking time off from school. In this case, social identity (publicly tallying up identities to determine who is more privileged and therefore less legitimate) and levels of social awareness (denouncing the other as not critical enough in their activities and asking others to side with or ostracize one or the other based on minor comments or actions deemed not *woke enough*) were used as weapons to gain social influence. These students aimed to

destroy one another socially and used the language of wokeness to do so – perhaps because they knew it would have the greatest impact in their social circles.

This extreme scenario was alarming in and of itself, particularly regarding the wellbeing of the students involved. The trends I noticed were of additional concern, however, because of how other students, not necessarily identified as woke or part of the social circles involved, expressed fear and anxiety as a result, creating barriers to entry into social justice awareness. Coalition-building became difficult among activist students as they grew wary of one another's intentions or perceptions, and others who were interested in joining or learning more were often too scared of making mistakes to even try. After taking the time to reflect, I can identify some of these same trends in myself as a college student, and unfortunately even in myself now. In speaking with other colleagues, I have heard similar confessions from them. For example, I recall as a student not wanting to associate with certain members of my LGBTQ+ organization because they had said something that I or others had perceived as problematic in the past, and I wanted to avoid being socially tainted. How or why did this change for us? Has it really? Is it inherent in the process of becoming socially aware, or was there something about our other identities or circumstances which led us to participate in these trends? How can professionals best guide students through becoming socially aware while minimizing these tendencies? Is that even a desirable outcome? It is these questions which have ultimately led to my interest in understanding the culture of wokeness in students today.

Problem Statement

Within the current decade, college campuses have increasingly become a

visible ground zero for activism and radical pushes against systems of power, particularly as they relate to racism (McElderry & Rivera, 2017; White, 2016). In many cases, campus tension and climate are at the forefront of the agenda, and students are stepping up to campus administrators, policies, faculty, and larger systems of oppression within higher education with demands and demonstrations, usually through grassroots efforts (McElderry & Rivera, 2017). National attention was particularly focused on the matter during the episode of campus unrest at the University of Missouri in the fall of 2015. Responding to a series of campus bias events, as well as happenings on the national stage, such as the murder of Michael Brown and the subsequent unrest in Ferguson, MO, students engaged in a series of demonstrations including walkouts, a hunger strike, and the refusal of the University Division 1 SEC football team to play in a conference game. Because of these and other events, the university system president, as well as the university chancellor, resigned from their positions (McElderry & Rivera, 2017). The events brought to national attention the turmoil roiling through campuses and sparked acts of solidarity from like-minded students across the nation (White, 2016). Alongside the emergence of the Black Lives Matter Movement, and the rise of woke in popular imaginations, student awareness and activism has continued to dominate administrative and higher education concerns (Seltzer, 2018).

But why bring up activism? I invoke the events at the University of Missouri to illustrate what could be understood as a shift in student consciousness in the United States. Whether this shift represents a generational change, is simply more publicized, or is a radical new understanding of social justice is yet to be determined. Regardless,

repercussions have already begun to ripple. Thornhill (2018) recently published the results of their study of admissions processes at historically and predominantly white institutions, which indicated that “white admissions counselors are more responsive to black students who present as deracialized and racially apolitical than they are to those who evince a commitment to antiracism and racial justice” (p. 1), noting specifically that the rise in student activism and awareness is likely implicated. While the study has disturbing implications for the climate and priorities of historically white institutions, it also raises the profile and stakes of woke studenthood, particularly for students of color (Thornhill, 2018). Remarkably, Michael Harriot (2018), writer for the online Afrocentric magazine *The Root*, reported on this study using the headline “White College Admissions Counselors Don't Want 'Woke' Black Students: Study,” further reflecting the connection between wokeness and modern student activism.

While campus and student cultures shift and find new ways to challenge institutions, this complication illustrates that wokeness has its own part to play in this saga. As demonstrated by the 2017 #StayWoke discussion event held by students at the University of Maryland, student activism and wokeness are certainly linked in some way – perhaps inextricably (Archie, 2017). A brief search across most college newspapers reveals a variety of think pieces, news articles, and op-eds written by students actively using the terminology of wokeness in other ways as well. “Woke Penn Student Watches ‘Black Panther’ and ‘Love, Simon’ in the Same Weekend” (Xu, 2018) proclaimed the title of a satire article in the University of Pennsylvania’s *Daily Pennsylvanian*, while the University of California, Berkeley’s *Daily*

Californian published a social justice etiquette article titled “The UC Berkeley Guidebook to Being Woke” (Bloom, 2017). Clearly students are actively using the concept of wokeness in their daily experiences, whether seriously or in jest, to communicate something unique. Additionally, the lengthy history of woke implies this is not merely a fad, and that there are serious implications for how students are engaging with it on campus.

What is not known is whether the students using this language come from certain identity groups, institutions, cultures, or political orientations. In recent weeks, national media attention has been brought to the high-profile development of campus programs or groups dedicated to engaging white students on issues of race, privilege, or inequity. While the merits or circumstances of such programs are outside the scope of this project, the reception of these programs across national media outlets further communicated the role of wokeness on campus. Popular far-right news outlet *Breitbart* published an article in response to one such group at the University of North Carolina, Charlotte with the headline “UNC Charlotte Offers Workshop to Help White Students Get Woke” (Ciccotta, 2018). Whether used genuinely or pejoratively, the language of woke crosses political lines, and in some cases appears to be linked directly with identity – not entirely unlike how Kelley (1962) and Beckham (1972) used the term.

As will be further explored in the literature review, there is a deep gap in the research when it comes to wokeness that means these questions remain unanswered for now. As researchers and practitioners, we need a scholarly understanding of how contemporary students are describing their own experiences and consciousness during

such a radical time as this. This information is critical to appropriately support both the development of such a consciousness and its healthy expression in students. So, again, what does this mean? What do students mean when they talk about wokeness, and what are the practical, social implications of those meanings?

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to gain an understanding of the meaning of woke as understood by students who identify as such, and to explore associated intra-group expectations and experiences. Specifically, the study addresses the following research questions: (a) how do self-identified woke students in the U.S. make sense of wokeness? And (b) how do self-identified woke students in the U.S. perceive the expectations of being woke in relation to their woke peers?

At this juncture, it is important to acknowledge that while I seek an understanding of how students are understanding and experiencing wokeness, I do not emerge with a clearly defined answer. Just as the original meaning of woke was unclear and somewhat malleable, and as systems of power, privilege, and inequity are constructed and entangled in contradictory, painful, and complex ways, the contemporary framework of wokeness will likely never be fully teased apart. Indeed, to produce a clean and neat definition of a complex concept which belongs to a variety of communities would most certainly be the outcome of erasure and sanitization of those communities. Instead, I sought to understand the experiences and perceptions of participants to the best of my ability.

A tremendous amount of literature exists on concepts such as allyship, critical consciousness, activism, or social justice awareness – all of which are related but fail

to fully address the meaning of contemporary wokeness. A review of the literature will address popular representations of wokeness from college students and examine the related processes and definitions in an attempt to triangulate the meaning of wokeness. These include allyship, critical consciousness, and social justice awareness. Additionally, I will explore what makes these concepts insufficient on their own when it comes to defining wokeness in college students. The study took the form of narrative inquiry grounded in the theories of critical consciousness (Freire, 1970) and intersectionality theory (Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1991; hooks, 1981, 1994). I collected data through a series of interviews with college students who identify as woke or meet criteria related to wokeness as outlined in the methodology section, and results were examined using thematic analysis. In the following chapter I provide a foundation for this work in the form of a literature review.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In recent decades, as the diversity of the college-going population has increased, so too has the necessity for positive intergroup relations and socially just campus communities (Broido, 2000; Reason & Davis, 2005). Current research, administrative trends, and popular media alike reflect this heightened interest (Reason & Davis, 2005). As a result, the literature is cluttered with a variety of terminology describing political awareness and action or behaviors in individuals and college students (Ashlee, Zamora, & Karikiri, 2017; Broido, 2000; Corning & Myers, 2002; Freire, 1974; Reason & Broido, 2005; Reason & Davis, 2005; Romero, 2016). These terms include allyship, social justice awareness, critical consciousness, activism, and wokeness (Ashlee, Zamora, & Karikiri, 2017; Broido, 2000; Corning & Myers, 2002; Freire, 1974; Reason & Broido, 2005; Reason & Davis, 2005; Romero, 2016). Are these terms intended to be interchangeable or do they reflect nuance in the research? Where does wokeness fit in this shifting landscape?

Just as there is a multitude of terminology relating to these topics in the literature, there is also significant interest in the social and academic education which leads one to that awareness. Ultimately, many student affairs professionals hope to encourage students to act in pursuit of more equitable campus or world, particularly around issues such as racism, classism, sexism, and so on (Torres-Harding, Steele, Schulz, Taha, & Pico, 2014). However, a student, or anyone else for that matter, cannot intentionally take steps towards addressing inequities until they are made aware of them. Of course, awareness does not necessarily lead to action, but action is predicated on awareness (Love, 2000). Because of this, examining the process of

becoming socially aware is critical within the field (Torres-Harding et al., 2014). To best understand how these actions emerge in students the processes which lead to them must be examined – potentially including wokeness. I will herein address the most common terminologies and processes tangentially related to wokeness in an effort to distinguish between them and triangulate the relative location of wokeness in the literature.

Woke: What We Know

As discussed, the terms *woke* or *wokeness* have appeared with increasing frequency in popular culture, but not so in the literature (Drinkard, 2017). For example, in a research project examining social justice curriculum development, Romero (2016) found that a majority of students of color interviewed brought up the term *woke* while participating in workshops designed to produce critical consciousness. However, no definition was ever established. Instead, a thematic analysis revealed the students loosely associated wokeness with ideas of self-awareness, awareness of current issues, and taking action (Romero, 2016).

Ashlee, Zamora, and Karikari (2017), “womxn” of color graduate students, “reflect[ed] on their individual journeys to ‘wokeness’” (p. 89) in an autoethnography of their graduate student experience studying higher education. They defined wokeness as “critical consciousness to intersecting systems of oppression. Specifically, to be a woke person is to hold an unretractable embodied consciousness and political identity acknowledging the oppression that exists in individual and collective experience” (Ashlee, Zamora & Karikiri, 2017, p. 90). Among their narratives, the authors identified three themes which reflect several of the elements

discussed in the literature to come. First, they described the agent of wokeness, a “catalytic factor that provokes critical consciousness” (Ashlee, Zamora, & Karikiri, 2017, p. 96). These agents ranged from classroom experiences to individuals. Second, the authors discussed the duality of wokeness, its nature as both liberating and emotionally defeating. Finally, they discussed community as a necessity to staying woke. To maintain wokeness through the pain described in the second theme, this solidarity and safety in community was required (Ashlee, Zamora, & Karikiri, 2017). Unfortunately, these pieces of work represent the only exploration of wokeness explicitly in the literature available at this time. It is notable, however, that both are related to higher education in some way.

Woke on college campuses. While the literature has yet to address issues of wokeness on campus as enacted or understood by college students, some information has been broadcast by students themselves through other means. In addition to the campus newspapers referenced in the introduction of this paper, an investigation into college news outlets, such as *Her Campus* and *Verge Campus*, as well as student publications in mainstream outlets such as the *New York Times*, helps elucidate how students may be interacting with the concept of wokeness. The volume of such available works indicates that students certainly have something to say.

College student contributor Nellie Kassebaum (2016) published a piece on *Her Campus*, a news outlet “written entirely by the world’s top college journalists” (Her Campus, 2009, para. 1). The article, titled “Why You Should Want to be Woke” (Kassebaum, 2016) described the author’s journey towards understanding wokeness, while presenting a case for why other students should strive to be woke. Kassebaum

(2016) identified woke as “not a term that belongs to a specific political group or protest movement” (para. 3), but rather a general frame of mind. An notable divergence from the history of wokeness as reflected in the Black American experience. Additionally, they stated that “being woke is not slang” (para. 3). Rather:

Being woke is the act of being familiar with current events and having the desire to do something about them. It's about being a representative for those in the minority and without voices. It's a desire to promote social justice and make equity a reality. It's about reducing harmful microaggressions. It's about changing our vocabulary and working for a better future, not just hoping for one (Kassebaum, 2016, para. 2).

Interestingly, the author’s definition appears to contradict their notion that woke does not belong to any particular movement – based on the content of their own definition, it would appear that woke is distinctly progressive, if not outrightly liberal, in nature. Interestingly, another student contributor to *Her Campus*, Erica Levenson (2018) offered a slightly different definition. Without mentioning particular issues or stances, Levenson (2018) defined woke as meaning “enlightened either academically or culturally” (para. 1). Levenson (2018) described the rise of the use of the word woke as the result of Generation Z having greater access to information, leading to a greater level of awareness and even disillusionment of the world than previous generations had during their young adulthood. “We are thus too young to be considered communists and too smart to be considered hippies, so the term ‘woke’ was frantically coined in order to label said group of unprecedented-activist-youngsters” (Levenson, 2018, para. 2). This understanding of wokeness reflects a lack of

knowledge of the lengthy history of the use of the word woke in Black America. Additionally, the generational distinction and sense of resentment at being labelled woke provides a new and interesting lens by which students may be understanding wokeness. Indeed, the author admits at the start of the article, “*I know*, you cringed when you read the title. I cringed when I wrote it” (Levenson, 2018, para. 1), referring to the perceived overuse of the word. In the case of both authors from *Her Campus*, demographic information was not available, therefore no analysis can be made as to the effect of their identities on their thoughts.

On the other hand, *The Tab*, Temple University’s student newspaper, sought out Temple students participating in discussion group for honors students of color called the Honorables of Color and asked them what the phrase “stay woke” meant to them (Baddal, 2016; Temple University Honors Program, 2018). Students described their understanding of woke in a variety of ways: as “a call to action” (Baddal, 2016, para. 8), “being aware of your position as a minority (or others as a minority)” (para. 10), being “critical thinkers about the society we live in” (para. 13), and “being aware of what’s going on around you, but also being able to have conversations about it” (para. 15). Additionally, students were probed to provide an explanation of what it is to *not* be “#woke” (Baddal, 2016, para. 16). Student responses included such themes as the choice to remain ignorant, refusal to act in the face of knowledge about systematic oppression, or choosing not engaging with one’s privilege (Baddal, 2016). In this case, the inclusion of the hashtag symbol in #woke is notable, as it implicitly links wokeness with social media or an online presence.

Regardless of how students appear to understand wokeness, a consistent

thread of desirability is linked with staying, or being woke. For example, student author Kassebaum (2016), whose article has previously been discussed, presented an argument for why people should want to be woke. “You should be angry about things that are happening in our country” (Kassebaum, 2016, para. 4) they stated, “being woke offers an opportunity to the change the circumstances” (para. 4), once again implying that woke is inherently tied to action. Similarly, Levenson (2018), who so begrudgingly used the terminology of woke, offered their audience a reading list to help them become more woke, including texts such as *1984* (Orwell, 1949) and *A Room of One’s Own* (Woolf, 1929). Perhaps a further reflection of Levenson’s (2018) misunderstanding of the history of wokeness, they reference only works penned by white, British authors. This may signal the further appropriation of woke by non-Black Americans, or perhaps a distortion of the original meaning in a contemporary setting. Finally, the students surveyed by *The Tab* reflected on the status of Temple University as a “#woke school” (Baddal, 2016, para. 11). While students roundly concluded that no, Temple had not achieved woke status, they did so by sharing examples of racist encounters or disappointment with decisions made by faculty and administration. It was almost with a sense of wistfulness that these students contemplated what might constitute a woke campus (Baddal, 2016).

Commentary on wokeness. At the same time, both students and non-students across the United States have been making journalistic commentary on the nature of wokeness – reflecting particularly on who can be woke, or what qualifies one to be woke. If it is such a desirable state, who gets to decide and what marks its achievement?

Writer Michael Harriot (2017) provided their take on wokeness in a satirical piece published in *The Root*, an Afro-centric online magazine, titled “The 6 Degrees of Wokeness.” According to Harriot (2017), American culture has become oversaturated with inappropriate use of the word woke as a result of most people not knowing that “there are distinct levels of woke-osity, each having its own distinctive characteristics” (Harriot, 2017). According to Harriot (2017), these levels are, asleep, groggy, newly woke, eyes wide open, woke AF, and insomniac. Level 4, eyes wide open, was described as the most desirable state, wherein members “no longer seek the acceptance of white America, but they understand that not everyone who straightens their hair and goes to church on Sunday is a sellout, a ‘lost soul’ or a ‘coon’” (Harriot, 2017). On the other hand, according to Harriot (2017), by the time one reaches level 6, insomniac, one has lost touch with reality and has given in entirely to conspiracy theory thinking. In the end, Harriot urges their readers to “stay woke. But not too woke” (Harriot, 2017).

While certainly sardonic in nature, Harriot’s (2017) piece reflects a strain of belief that woke has become the leftist retort to PC or political correctness – a self-congratulatory means of displaying one’s political standing (Hess, 2016). Arts critic and internet culture writer for the *New York Times* Amanda Hess (2016) described a world in which wokeness has become a chic badge of honor, desired by those who do not fully understand its meaning. As a result, amongst those who identify as woke, wrote Hess (2016), a culture of competition has emerged in which people clamor to be publicly seen as more woke than others. According to Hess (2016), the meaning of woke has thus evolved: “‘Woke’ now works as a dig against those who claim to be

culturally aware and yet are, sadly, lacking in self-awareness” (Hess, 2016). The core meaning of wokeness, while still applicable and useful, has become overshadowed by its appropriation in the mainstream, argued Hess (2016). Similarly, *Odyssey Online* writer Krista Evans (2017) proposed that woke refers only to one’s level of awareness, and that how one behaves with that awareness is not always productive or predictable. “People who usually fall under this label of higher awareness lack the compassion you would expect, they are usually condescending and rude” (Evans, 2017, para. 1). Evans (2017) argued those who use the label of woke to describe themselves are not yet truly woke, instead focused on holier-than-thou self-aggrandizement.

This kind of commentary is not lost on campus conversations, either. In 2016, Fordham University student Claire Nunez published the piece “What It Really Means to Be ‘Woke’” with *Verge Campus*, an online multimedia platform focused on college students. Like other students, Nunez (2016) described being woke as a state of being socially aware and making the choice to act on that awareness. Specifically, they distinguished taking action as different from activities like posting messages on social media or “asking for change” (Nunez, 2016) – instead they argued one should put in the work themselves. In reference to this, Nunez (2016) described their classmates, many of whom espouse ideals of social justice but are reluctant to engage with the Bronx community outside their college gates. In other words, as Hess (2016) described, Nunez (2016) agreed that there are those who claim wokeness but do not live up to its ideals. This leads to the discussion of allyship, which similarly is often described as an identity which can only be bestowed and not declared.

Allyship

Because the overwhelming bulk of literature around political consciousness is focused on allyship, it must be included in any serious review of the literature. The use of the term ally in student affairs literature emerged in the early 1990s when Washington and Evans (1991) published work encouraging heterosexual practitioners to take up practices to support and advocate for lesbian, gay, and bisexual students (Broido, 2000). Washington and Evans (1991) defined an ally as “a person who is a member of the 'dominant' or 'majority' group who works to end oppression in his or her [sic] personal and professional life through support of, and as an advocate with and for, the oppressed population” (p. 195). This broad definition leaves room for understanding allyship in several contexts, such as in regarding racism or sexism, and is only limited, importantly, by the dominant group identity of the ally in question. Ideas of allyship according to this definition did indeed exist in the literature prior to the work of Washington and Evans (1991), particularly regarding the awareness and role of white people in antiracist work, though the specific terminology of allyship was not used (Edwards, 1970; Katz, 1978). This history and the tremendous amount of literature available regarding allyship illustrates the significance of allyship as a strong pillar supporting social justice work, in student affairs work and beyond. It is possible that allyship in this context could be understood as a kind of wokeness for dominant identities. A review of that literature follows.

Models of allyship. While allyship is indeed a concept deeply explored in the literature, no single theory or model of allyship dominates. Instead, several authors over the years have put forth frameworks to help practitioners understand the

processes and outcomes of allyship, some of the most commonly referenced and influential of which are explored here. Broido (2000) conducted a study investigating the process and related factors by which undergraduate students become social justice allies, identifying six themes which positively contribute to the developmental, or educational, process towards allyship. These themes included precollege attitudes reflecting egalitarian belief and fairness, acquiring information about oppression in formal and informal settings, meaning making through discussion, self-reflection, and perspective taking, confidence, activist skill development, and the importance of recruitment and chance (Broido, 2000; Broido & Reason, 2005). Additionally, Broido (2000) identified that, perhaps most critically, “to move from being willing and able to act as allies, to actually doing so, required external initiation” (p. 7). It is therefore to be understood that a community of, or at least interpersonal interaction among, allies is crucial to the development and maintenance of that allyship. Indeed, while some of the study’s participants learned individually through activities such as independent study or attending lectures, the majority of participants credited their development to social activities such as extensive discussion (Broido, 2000). To even spark the beginning of the process of becoming an ally, then, is strongly linked to intentional social interactions with others.

Similarly, Bishop (2002) identified six steps in their model of social justice ally development published in a guidebook for those seeking to become allies. Those steps include: (1) understanding oppression, (2) understanding different oppressions, (3) healing the pain associated with consciousness-raising, (4) working towards personal liberation, (5) working towards the liberation of others (allyship), and finally

(6) maintaining hope (Bishop, 2002; Broido & Reason, 2005). Bishop's (2002) work strongly emphasized the role of reflection and self-examination in the process of becoming an ally and highlighted the nature of oppression as interconnected rather than hierarchical in order to undercut the interpretation that allyship or social justice work can be done in isolation.

Few models, however, address any development which occurs after the achievement of this allyship state or recognize a nonlinear development. One of the few is Edwards' (2006) conceptual model of aspiring ally identity development. Centering on students who "already support diversity and social justice" (p. 39), their model addresses the motivation, views, actions, and goals of allies at three stages: aspiring ally for self-interest, aspiring ally for altruism, and ally for social justice (Edwards, 2006). In this model, self-identified allies who fall short of the ally for social justice category can still be considered allies. Edwards (2006) emphasized the importance of understanding the motivation of allies as the source of potential unintended harm which may be inflicted on the target group the ally intends to help. Additionally, like Broido (2000) and Bishop (2002), Edwards' (2006) work reinforces the role of the social element in allyship: "A social justice approach to education focused on social change is in the best interest of all members of society, not just those who are from marginalized social groups and the direct targets of the system of oppression" (p. 41).

While these general allyship models have indeed been instructive in the field, others have developed identity- or context-based allyship models which address the particulars of a specific dimension of oppression. For example, in the context of

disability allyship, Evans, Assadi, and Herriott (2005) used Briodo's (2000) model to argue that "increasing awareness among individuals who are not disabled that their able-bodied identity is ascribed and affords them power and privilege is a necessary first step in developing disability allies" (Evans et al., 2005, p. 68). While their work was based on that of Broido (2000) and Washington and Evans (1991), the authors use the particular context of disability to describe the associated behaviors and actions of disability allies. Examples of these include raising awareness and advocacy, direct action, and self-education (Evans et al., 2005).

The trouble with allyship. Despite its prominence in both social justice literature and educational practices, the literature identifies several shortcomings with conceptions of allyship, underlining why a discussion of allyship alone is an insufficient framework for this project (Patel, 2011; Russell & Bohan, 2016). Russell and Bohan (2016) contributed to the criticism of allyship by pointing out that allyship is generally presented with "uncritically positive views" in the literature (p. 335). Perhaps due to this acritical approach, models of allyship, such as those previously discussed, tend to focus on reducing prejudice and increasing motivation to act in privileged groups. As a result, they ultimately center those privileged groups while further marginalizing the oppressed by casting them only as victims in need of protection or championing (Russell & Bohan, 2016). This is significant, they wrote, because "recent critiques have pointed to potentially reactionary effects for disadvantaged groups when intergroup contact primarily serves the aims of the advantaged majority, especially in the absence of significant overt hostility" (Russell & Bohan, 2016, p. 388).

From their study, Russell and Bohan (2016) developed a new model for understanding ally activism in the dimension of LGBTQ+ allyship. This model separated attitudes and actions into either “first-order change” or “second-order change” (Russell & Bohan, 2016, p. 345). First-order change referred to actions or attitudes which are grounded in relationships and the ally’s identity as an ally, including such behaviors as not challenging power relationships, focusing exclusively on policy change, and not including the voices of the marginalized populations they intend to support (Russell & Bohan, 2016). Second-order change, on the other hand, was based in values and included behaviors such as focusing on overall climate change, including voices of target group members, self-examination of privilege, and challenging the status quo (Russell & Bohan, 2016). Russell and Bohan (2016) argued that the literature currently conflates these two kinds of allyship, which limits space for critical reflection by both allies themselves and the academy.

Indeed, Endres and Gould (2009) examined the relationship between theories of whiteness and service learning in the college context, seeking markers of genuine allyship being performed by the students involved. Reflecting many of the models discussed thus far, the authors used education around whiteness and racial privilege to prepare their students for engagement in communities of color, believing that education paired with action could lead to the students acting as allies (Endres & Gould, 2009). Ultimately, however, their study found that “students were able to recognize themselves as having White privilege, but were not able to see themselves as agents of change or allies in antiracist struggles” (p. 430). The students in question were unable to extricate their status as white people from the construct of Whiteness

as taught by the authors, and could therefore only view their own engagement as a means of charitably using their status as white people to benefit non white people (Endres & Gould, 2009). These results reflect and reinforce the findings and model of Russell and Bohan (2016) by highlighting the focus on reducing prejudice and replicating systems of power in allyship development, but also in the conflation of what could be understood as first order and second order change under the banner of allyship.

Secondly, the idea of allyship as it has been discussed in the literature is based on a binary system which categorizes individuals as either dominant or subordinate, ally or oppressed (Patel, 2011). According to Patel (2011), this limits possibilities for coalition-building and contributes to a color-blind overgeneralization of non-white people in the context of anti-racist allyship. Moreover, Patel (2011) contended that allyship models mask the existence of horizontal, or targeted-identity to targeted-identity, oppression. Alternatively, allyship also does not account for anti-oppressive beliefs and actions performed by members of oppressed groups, whether on behalf of other communities or their own (Patel, 2011). This is particularly troubling in the context of intersectionality, wherein all the identities of the ally, in whatever configuration, certainly have a profound experience of the development of that allyship identity. What role, Patel (2011) asked, do individuals with marginalized identities play in the struggle for change under the current understanding of allyship?

Social Justice Awareness, Interest, and Attitudes

This leads to an examination of models which are not necessarily dependent on the identity of the agent and thereby have the potential to address issues of

horizontal oppression and self-advocacy. Social justice awareness, interest, or attitudes describe “notions of equity or alleviating disparity and the redistribution of resources” (Miller et al., 2009, p. 498). In essence, this term refers to the state or process of becoming aware of social inequities and a commitment, or at least interest, in addressing these issues (Torres-Harding et al., 2014). Social justice awareness, unlike allyship, is not dependent on social positioning, meaning that one’s identities as dominant or targeted are not necessarily relevant. Allyship and social justice awareness, however, are closely linked in the literature, frequently interchangeably, to the point that one can often presume the use of social justice awareness implies positioning as an ally. In fact, the term social justice ally is regularly used in the literature (Broido, 2000; Broido & Reason, 2005; Jenkins, Shriberg, Conway, Ruecker & Jones, 2017; Patton & Bondi, 2015; Reason & Davis, 2005; Torres-Harding et al., 2014).

Miller et al. (2009) developed an alternative social-cognitive career theory (SCCT) model of social justice interest and commitment using socio-cognitive analysis. The authors identified several influences on the development (or lack thereof) of social justice commitment in college students. These influences included self-efficacy, social supports and barriers, outcome expectation and social justice interests. Of these, self-efficacy was found to have the strongest impact on developing social justice *interest*, which in turn had the strongest influence on developing social justice *commitment* (Miller et al., 2009). These findings, alongside those of Broido (2000) and Bishop (2002), have implications for the potential of developing social justice awareness in students in higher education, which as I have explored has

potentially strong ties to wokeness. Indeed, Broido (2000) included several suggestions for college administrators towards creating environments which encourage such development, both in her original publication and in later analysis with co-author Robert Reason (2005). The commitments or actions described by these models often refer to activist behaviors, as discussed below.

Activism

Whether explicitly as in the case of Russell and Bohan (2016) or implicitly through discussion of allyship such as in Washington and Evans (1991), activism plays a central role in the topics discussed in the literature thus far. While the role activism plays, or does not play, in wokeness is not yet known, it is prudent to address the topic at this time. Using the definition developed by Corning and Myers (2002), activism consists of “various collective, social-political, problem-solving behaviors spanning a range from low-risk, passive, and institutionalized acts to high-risk, active, and unconventional behaviors” (p. 704). This broadly includes such activities as physical protest, voting, boycotting, and personal choices such as to use non-sexist language in an effort to resist patriarchy (Corning & Myers, 2002). If we are to understand that wokeness is mired in a history of anti-racist struggle and is somehow linked to a state of awareness which demands, or at least is linked to, action, then I argue that a discussion of literature on activism has a role to play in many if not all the concepts relating to wokeness as discussed in this review.

Student activism is a complicated topic to address, as the literature has historically failed to provide an “overarching theoretical explanation” (Altbach, 1989, p. 97) for it, making an integration of the literature difficult (Page, 2010). Regardless,

it is widely accepted that modern student activism in the United States was forged in the flames of the student social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, as prior to this time student protests were primarily to do with campus related grievances (Page, 2010; Rosas, 2010). During the 1960s and 1970s, enormously powerful social movements such as the civil rights movement, the gay liberation movement, and the feminist movement bled onto and were even born in some cases on college campuses (Page, 2010). Student activism has persisted and evolved since that time and has had significant influence on higher education. Most notably the continued diversification of higher education, both in terms of administration, policy, and student body (Harrison & Mather, 2017).

Characteristics of student activists. To be an activist has been discussed in the literature as a kind of identity, and the characteristics of that identity and those who have engaged in activism have thus been well explored (Altbach, 1989; Astin, Astin, Bayer & Bisconti, 1975; Corning & Myers, 2002). Early on, Astin et al. (1975) identified student activist leaders as generally belonging to one of four categories, in order of frequency: non-radical white students, student government leaders, African American students, and students from the radical left. In addition, they found student activists to be more likely majors in the social sciences and humanities (Astin et al., 1975). Similarly, Kerr (1970) described student activists, particularly those of the 1960s, as either issue-by-issue protesters, liberal radicals, or radical radicals. This spectrum ranged from those who participated in activism based on particular issues when the timing was right for them, to those who sought to radically disrupt the system by any means necessary (Kerry, 1970). In a nearer to modern time frame

Altbach (1989) described the body of student activists as being organized in concentric circles, or rings. First, at the core, is the leadership – a “tiny minority [...] often significantly more radical than most participants” (Altbach, 1989, p. 102). The next ring consisted of active followers who are well informed and willing to participate in the activities organized by central leadership. Finally, the largest ring consisted of sympathetic students who may believe in the goals of the movement but are not well versed in the specifics and unlikely to become involved directly. These rings were nestled in the context of the larger student population who is either opposed to the student activists or apathetic (Altbach, 1989). Altbach (1989) went on to describe in greater detail the characteristics of the students who make up these rings, such as their most likely being humanities or social science majors.

More contemporary research, such as that of Corning and Meyers (2002), has sought to theorize the involvement of students with activism in an academic instrument. As a result of a series of studies, Corning and Meyers (2002) developed the Activist Orientation Scale (AOS) as a tool to “assess individuals’ propensities to engage in activist behaviors” (p. 723). The AOS consisted of a self-administered assessment which measures behaviors or orientations in the respondent on a 4-point scale. These included such behaviors or beliefs as displaying bumper stickers with political messages, contacting public officials over political issues, donating money to political organizations, and voting in non-presidential elections (Corning & Meyers, 2002). Results were categorized as conventional activism or high-risk activism, and were nonspecific as to the content of the activism in question. Instead, the focus was on the means. In other words, the scale can be used to describe and predict

conservative activist behaviors in an equal manner to liberal activist behaviors (Corning & Meyers, 2002).

Learning outcomes of student activism. Beyond simply addressing who may be involved in student activism, the literature has investigated learning outcomes associated with that involvement (Biddix, Somers & Polman 2009; Hamrick 1998; Page, 2010). Looking particularly at student engagement in protest, Biddix et al. (2009) used the framework provided by Keeling (2004) in *Learning Reconsidered* to identify how institutions can increase learning for students engaged in civic demonstrations such as protests. According to Biddix et al. (2009), students who engaged in activism “learned to advance a community search for mutual agreement” (p. 140), “learned to preserve and legitimize expression of a broad range of perspectives and judgments” (p. 140), “examined and developed personal values” (p. 141), “demonstrated how to bring about change in society” (p.141), “developed a sense of community on campus” (p. 141), “reconsidered the role of individual versus society” (p. 142), “demonstrated a commitment to global citizenry through involvement” (p. 142), and “recognized the importance of direct access and free information as democratic ideals” (p. 142). The authors were then able to furnish recommendations for professionals in higher education who may encounter student activists to maximize their learning opportunities (Biddix et al., 2009). The results of this study dovetailed with the past work of Hamrick (1998). Hamrick (1998) wrote in support of campus administration supporting student activism and dissent as educational opportunities, arguing that such dissent represents students practicing “citizenship in action” (p. 458). These activities, they argued, were necessary for the

development of civically engaged graduates who understand democratic principles, a primary goal of higher education (Hamrick, 1998). Overall, the literature suggests that engagement with activism, while dependent on several factors, can lead to student learning if the opportunity is well harnessed by practitioners or students themselves. Knowing how wokeness possibly contribute to this is thus of interest to practitioners as well as scholars.

Critical Consciousness

In many ways, the historical discussion of wokeness parallels many elements of critical consciousness. Paulo Freire (1970) first described critical consciousness as a requisite frame of mind for oppressed people working towards liberation. Necessarily the result of the human capacity of reflection, Freire (1970) defined critical consciousness as involving not only becoming aware of social inequalities but linking that education to action (Romero, 2016). In this theory, the process of education is the critical means of liberatory activities, perhaps the only means (Freire, 1970). Critical consciousness continues to be used today, particularly in reference to the continuous processes of questioning and challenging systems of oppression (Romero, 2016). Notably, critical consciousness is defined by action rather than attitude, identity, or social positioning. Further exploration of critical consciousness theory will take place in the conceptual framework.

Themes and Gaps in the Literature

The evolution and interrelatedness of these terms illustrates the ad hoc and ambiguous nature of issues of equity and social justice. Despite this, four themes emerge across this literature on models of and processes towards social justice

awareness. First, the necessary step of gathering and/or learning information about systems of oppression. Second, the impact of the outside agent who either catalyzes interest or invites one to participate in social justice. Third, the importance of self-efficacy and community towards the goal of social justice awareness, and finally, the challenge in balancing the sense of defeat or self-aggrandizement which can come with that awareness.

Despite these themes, tremendous gaps still exist, particularly regarding wokeness. The work of Ashlee, Zamora, and Karikiri (2017) serves as the only work which explicitly explores wokeness in the literature. This is insufficient as the authors explore wokeness from the perspective of three graduate students, which while valuable cannot be used to generalize a definition of wokeness or address the undergraduate perspective. Additionally, there does not appear to be any literature exploring relationships among individuals who fall under any of the categories described here (allyship, social justice awareness, wokeness). This is needed, as students are clearly discussing ideas of wokeness and related social dynamics, at the very least through online means (Baddal, 2016; Kassebaum, 2016; Levenson, 2018; Nunez, 2016). Without specifically calling out identities, these authors among others, collectively discern between wokeness as a social performance, usually by people carrying privileged identities, and wokeness as the legitimate descriptor for a political orientation and set of behaviors (Evans, 2017; Harriot, 2017; Hess, 2016; Nunez, 2016). What emerges then, is a question about how those subjects, if indeed they do exist, interact with or view one another. While bodies of research exist addressing the relationship between allies and oppressed groups, for example, further research

examining the impact of in-group relations when it comes to allies or individuals who are socially aware or woke is warranted (Edwards, 2006; Russell & Bohan, 2016).

Conceptual Framework

As a means of understanding the student interpretation and experience of wokeness, I employ Freire's (1970) theory of critical consciousness in conjunction with intersectionality. Through an understanding of critical consciousness, which emphasizes both community relationships and action towards liberation, modified through the lens of intersectionality, I hope to uncover how students understand their wokeness and illuminate how their activities and peer expectations support or undermine that position.

Paulo Freire's critical consciousness. Of particular interest to this project is educator and theorist Paulo Freire's (1970) concept of *conscientização*, translated from the Portuguese as critical consciousness. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and *Education for Critical Consciousness*, Freire (1970, 1974) wrote of critical consciousness as one's awareness of social inequities linked with the action one takes to counter those systems. Without action, there is no critical consciousness (Freire, 1970). Responding to what he referred to as a banking method of education, Freire (1970, 1974) argued that critical consciousness and a curriculum which supports its development is a necessary prerequisite for the abolition of oppressive systems. This banking system refers to education in which the student is meant to passively consume information presented by the educator with no opportunity to question or challenge the intended narrative. He, therefore, called for a "liberating education" which "consists in acts of cognition, not transferrals [sic] of information" (Freire,

1970, p. 79). Specifically, Freire (1970) theorized that participation in praxis, or critical reflection, is a necessary condition for achieving a critical consciousness. Indeed, *conscientização* is essentially “consciousness as consciousness of consciousness” (Freire, 1970, p. 79).

Moane (2010) interpreted this means by which praxis leads to consciousness-raising as the process of linking the political to the personal. Educators and researchers have employed a variety of methods using this theory to design curricula that break from the banking system to develop a critical consciousness in their students (Curtin, Kende, & Kende, 2016; Patel, 2011; Romero, 2016; Wallin-Ruschman, 2014). Romero’s (2016) work, for example, was framed in this critical pedagogy theory in its examination of a social justice curriculum for themes to guide educators hoping to spark critical consciousness in their students. Romero (2016) revealed themes of communication, listening, engagement, and connecting the personal to the political as key to consciousness-raising – all of which resonate strongly with Freire’s theory. Romero’s (2016) study helps to elucidate the value of critical consciousness theory in considering how to best promote social justice awareness in students, which according to the literature is similar but not necessarily identical to critical consciousness or wokeness.

Notably, critical consciousness theory emphasizes the role of community and dialogue in developing critical consciousness and as a marker of its achievement. The banking system of education which serves to prevent students from reaching critical consciousness assumes that one is not *of* the world, merely *in* it (Freire, 1970). This separation of individual and world prevents the bearer from being conscious, and

instead understands them as one who possesses *a* consciousness – a consciousness waiting to be filled by the educator (Freire, 1970). Solidarity, on the other hand, results from meaningful communication between the individual and the world, between the individual and their community, between the educator and the student. This kind of dialogue is free of domination and is based on a shared quest for “the liberation of humankind” (Freire, 1970, p. 89). Faith, hope, and love are central to this kind of communication (Freire, 1970).

In *Education for Critical Consciousness*, Freire (1974) identified critical consciousness as containing different stages, expanding the theory to distinguish among those who are critically conscious by “the extent to which one is able to question their surroundings and historical context” (Patel, 2011, p. 84). First among these stages was semi-intransitive consciousness, wherein one is entirely limited by their “sphere of biological necessity” (Freire, 1974, p. 13). The semi-intransitive individual is completely disengaged from the larger world, which Freire (1974) illustrates through using indigenous Brazilian communities who have had no exposure to the larger Brazilian society as an example. Next was naïve transitivity, a state of consciousness characterized by nostalgia for the past, an underestimation of the common person, a tendency to use “fanciful explanations” (Freire, 1974, p.14), fragile arguments, and a preference for polemics over genuine dialogue. Freire (1974) cautioned that if naïve transitivity does not progress into a transitive state it may devolve into fanaticism. Through praxis and increased genuine interaction with other individuals and the world, however, one can move on to enter the transitive state. Transitivity describes the permeable individual who understands the dynamic nature

of the world through dialogue with their fellow persons. The final stage was critical transitivity, which is reached through continued additional praxis and community dialogue. Freire (1974) described a critically transitive consciousness as characterized by:

depth in the interpretation of problems; by the substitution of causal principles for magical explanations; by the testing of one's "findings" and by openness to revision; by the attempt to avoid distortion when perceiving problems and to avoid preconceived notions when analyzing them; by refusing to transfer responsibility; by rejecting passive positions; by soundness of argumentation; by the practice of dialogue rather than polemics; by receptivity to the new for reasons beyond mere novelty and by the good sense not to reject the old just because it is old—by accepting what is valid in both old and new. (p. 14)

It is at this stage that one can genuinely work towards self-liberation. According to Patel (2011), Freire's stage model is a continuum of integration with the world. Based on my own experiences as described in the researcher narrative, this highlights the potential nature of wokeness something which develops, or exists in cumulative stages. In the end, the critically conscious, or perhaps woke, individual is in, of, and with the world. Freire (1974) was also careful to point out that *conscientização* is the development along this process – not the process itself.

Intersectionality. As previously noted, critical consciousness theory states that without acting against systems of oppression one cannot be critically conscious (Freire, 1970). At the same token, however, in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (1970) argued that liberation cannot be enacted or genuinely sought after by the

oppressors. Freire distinguished the oppressor from the oppressed by virtue of their societal and political power (Freire 1970). Whereas institutional oppression refers to “how people are excluded or deprived of rights or opportunities as a result of the normal operations of the institution” (Nieto, 1996, p.36), the roles of oppressor and oppressed as used by Freire refer to individuals (Freire, 1974, 1970). Yet, various identities and levels of power exist within each individual’s experience and combination of identities, and so no person can be entirely defined by a single identity (Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1991; hooks, 1981). Thus, I employ intersectionality to better contextualize my approach to this research to explicitly avoid a single-axis approach. I do so because while critical consciousness theory may indeed limit a critical consciousness to only those without political power, the literature does not support that that is *necessarily* true for wokeness at this point. As will be discussed in the methodology, this study seeks to determine how woke students interpret or define wokeness, and so I seek not to limit what findings may emerge.

Rooted in Black feminist movements, intersectionality emphasizes the interlocking nature of any one individual’s multiple identities (Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1991; hooks, 1981). In contrast to traditional frameworks in academia, which value compartmentalization and a “fixity of ideas” (Dill & Zambrana, 2009 p.2), intersectionality seeks to shift focus and achieve four primary goals (Dill & Zambrana, 2009). First, to reimagine intellectualism and thinking about the world to incorporate the messy, contradictory, and “overlapping ways that human life is experienced” (Dill & Zambrana, 2009, p. 2). Second, to communicate this way of

thinking through the promotion of institutional change in higher education and transformation of modes of teaching. Third, to “apply the knowledge in an effort to create a society in which all voices are heard” (Dill & Zambrana, 2009, p. 2). And finally, to actively promote and advocate for public policies which serve and respond to a variety of stakeholders, including those previously marginalized.

In actionable terms, according to intersectionality, each individual holds several identities which shape their reality and position in society. For example, a wealthy, Asian-American, cisgender, bisexual, woman experiences her identities differently than a working-class, heterosexual, cisgender, African immigrant might. Similarly, Black women do not merely experience oppression based on their womanhood, but also around their Blackness – in markedly different ways than would a Black man. Moreover, this theoretical frame does not subscribe to an additive understanding of oppressed or dominant identities, instead arguing that they are qualitatively different based on one’s combined identities (Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1991; hooks, 1981). According to intersectionality, there is not likely to be any one oppressor or oppressed individual. Rather, social positioning and interaction between oppressed or oppressive identities may shape how one enters, experiences, or achieves wokeness and integration with their community and the world.

The linking of critical consciousness and intersectionality is not new. Instead it is rooted in the history of the theories themselves. bell hooks (1981), who has been a significant contributor to the continued development of intersectionality, has also written at length on the connection between her work and Freire’s (1974, 1970). Although Freire’s (1974, 1970) work was based locally in his experiences in Brazil,

hooks (1994) has reflected on the parallels she experienced regarding the banking and liberatory modes of education in the racialized American south. Indeed, she wrote that “When I discovered the work of the Brazilian thinker Paulo Freire, my first introduction to critical pedagogy, I found a mentor and a guide, someone who understood that learning could be liberatory” (hooks, 1994, p. 6). According to her recollection, Freire’s work was deeply influential in the development of her critical theoretical approach. Additionally, hooks (1994) wrote on the connection between the theories, the base concepts which they share in common. Among those, perhaps most importantly, is the idea of praxis – the link between thought and action. Of this hooks (1994) wrote:

This is the important initial stage of transformation – that historical moment when one begins to think critically about the self and identity in relation to one’s political circumstance. Again, this is one of the concepts in Freire’s work – and in my own work – that is frequently misunderstood by readers in the United States. Many times people will say to me that I seem to be suggesting that it is enough for individuals to change how they think. (p. 47).

hooks (1994) also wrote of an interaction the two authors were able to have in person during a workshop in California. At this meeting hooks (1994) raised challenges to sexist notions present in both Freire’s work and others present. In response, hooks (1994) recounted that he accepted her criticisms and made an effort to address them through the revision of his work and inclusion of feminist theory in later works. The string of ideas between critical consciousness theory and intersectionality, though unique, are irreversibly linked and changed in both directions. To overlay one theory

over the other for the purpose of this study, then, is both precedented and in some ways natural.

In the context of wokeness. Drawing on both theoretical approaches, critical consciousness theory and intersectionality, provides an opportunity to understand better the complexities involved in one's ability to engage in critical consciousness without limiting participation to particular groups based on an oppressor/oppressed dichotomy. Wallin-Ruschman (2014) used a similar framework in their study of the role of emotions in the development of critical consciousness. The author paired intersectionality with critical theory, noting, as I have done, the critical role of dialogue in critical consciousness. Additionally, Shin, Ezeofor, Smith, Welch, and Goodrich (2016) intentionally incorporated the framework of intersectionality into their work developing the Contemporary Critical Consciousness Measure (CCCM). The authors noted the "striking parallel process" (p. 3) of analysis using critical consciousness and intersectionality frameworks, synthesizing them to keep an understanding of structural oppression at the core of their work. The research conducted to develop the CCCM was thus designed to "provide a more nuanced assessment of the mechanisms through which respondents have gained their awareness and attitudes" (p. 4). It is in this same way that I seek to employ these theories.

I contend that critical consciousness theory alone as a framework for this project is incomplete without a consideration of complex identity and oppressor/oppressed dynamics – as articulated through intersectionality. Additionally, how individuals working along the continuum of critical consciousness approach the

necessary dialogue and community engagement outlined by Freire (1970, 1974) is likely influenced by their positioning as understood through intersectionality. This conceptual model framed my approach to investigating students' understanding of wokeness and the associated expectations and experiences therein.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Qualitative research focuses on the analysis of imagery and text, as opposed to quantitative data such as statistics (Creswell, 2014). In qualitative research, the researcher becomes the primary research instrument, and, as such, reflexivity on their part is central to understanding how researcher backgrounds contribute and may shape the nature of the work. Additionally, qualitative research seeks to build understandings directly from the data onwards to more abstract findings (Creswell, 2014). The data in question comes from a holistic account gathered from participants in a natural setting, typically through face-to-face interaction, and meaning is derived directly from participants (Creswell, 2014).

This study employed narrative inquiry and thematic analysis to gain a clearer understanding of wokeness from the study participants. This kind of qualitative research study is prompted by the nature of the subject, wokeness, and my epistemological approach in critical constructivism. Herein, I discuss the specifics of the research design and data analysis, as well as the meaning and influence of my relationality and epistemological approach on the work. Additionally, I discuss the bounding of the study and methods for ensuring trustworthiness.

Epistemological Approach: Critical Constructivism

I approach the world of research and the fundamental question of knowledge as a pragmatist. Pragmatism has a long history of being used in mixed methods research; however, arguments have been made more recently for its applicability to social research (Morgan, 2013). As a pragmatist, I understand the different epistemological approaches to research as social context and action, rather than

“abstract philosophical systems” (Morgan, 2013, p. 1049). Inquiry can be situated in various paradigms, and knowledge can be the result of action being taken within those paradigms. As such, I am not devoted directly to one single paradigm, but rather evaluate the context, nature, and basis of the inquiry itself to determine the appropriate epistemological approach.

Because of the inherently power- and socially-based nature of wokeness and social justice work, as well as the experiential focus of this study, I used a critical constructivist approach. Constructivist epistemologies posit that knowledge is created by a collective process, situating itself in opposition to positive and post-positivist approaches which assert the existence and importance of a single objective, or neutral, truth (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014). Where constructivism understands that our beliefs, ideas, and identities are the result of our cultures and experiences and the hold they have on us, critical constructivism extends that concept by urging the researcher to unearth the role of dominant cultures on that understanding – including the researcher’s understanding of self (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014; Kincheloe, 2005a; Kincheloe, 2005b). This epistemological approach was derived from Paulo Freire’s (1970, 1974) critical consciousness theory (Kincheloe, 2005b). Indeed, according to Kincheloe (2005b), who developed the approach, “the notion of critical constructivism allows teachers and students a critical consciousness” (p. 11). Like Freire’s (1970, 1974) critical consciousness, critical constructivism was developed from a philosophy of teaching and learning. In the context of such research, critical consciousness explores the “complex interrelationship between teaching and learning and knowledge production and research” (Kincheloe, 2005b, p. 3).

Critical constructivism has many additional tenets and nuances in its approach to knowledge and meaning, which I further explicate here. Like constructivism, critical constructivism asserts that knowledge is created by people based on their context and worldviews (Rogers, 2012). This is true for all people and all knowledge, as knowers are socially situated and located in a historical context (Kincheloe, 2005a). Critical constructivists are as concerned with the process by which information becomes knowledge and the lenses through which it is known. Critical constructivism is preoccupied with the role of power in these processes and lenses, how knowledge itself is privileged and unprivileged, and how knowers are privileged and not privileged in a context of social power systems (Kincheloe, 2005b). As a result, the purpose of critically constructivist research is not to reduce variables to produce universalizable truths, but rather to maximize them in search of rich, thick understandings of the world as shaped by various political, cultural, social, and pedagogical realities (Kincheloe, 2005a). Finally, critical constructivists seek new means of understanding the world, primarily through the valuing of knowledge and ways “of meaning-making traditionally dismissed by dominant culture and mainstream academics” (Kincheloe, 2005b, p. 4).

These elements make the use of critical constructivism of interest to qualitative researchers, for whom the development of thick description and the awareness of the researcher as the research instrument are key objectives (Creswell, 2014). In the context of this study, critical constructivism aligns with the conceptual framework of critical consciousness and intersectionality, creating a thread of continuity throughout the design of the research, which helps to ground the study.

Additionally, critical constructivism poses a unique relationship with the concept of wokeness, and reveals, as discussed in the researcher narrative, my role and immersion in the work. Critical constructivism asks the researcher to carefully examine their role, orientation, and worldview in relationship to their work, subjects, and the academy – a notion that helps to illustrate both the motivation behind the development of this project and its importance. The central tenets of constructivism remain intact as well, and therefore this collective approach, which considers social positioning and values individualized meaning-making, is best for investigating how participants experience wokeness in a way which maximizes the variables. My interaction with participants and their interactions with their peers are both the vehicle for and source of the knowledge I investigated.

Research Design: Narrative Inquiry

As described in the introduction, the purpose of this study is to gain an understanding of the meaning of woke as understood by students who identify as such, and to explore any associated intra-group expectations and experiences. The primary research question of this study is how do self-identified woke students in the U.S. make sense of wokeness? The secondary research question is how do self-identified woke students in the U.S. perceive the expectations of being woke in relation to their woke peers? To address these research questions, I employed narrative inquiry. This methodology is most appropriate considering the research questions, subject matter, and critical constructivist epistemological approach. Where constructivism values the individual contribution to collective meaning-making, narrative inquiry “begins with the experiences as expressed in the lived and told

stories of [the] individual” (Creswell, 2013, p. 70). Similarly, the importance of maximizing variables and centering the unique experiences of individual worldviews as a means of creating knowledge, which are central to critical constructivism, make narrative inquiry especially appropriate (Kincheloe, 2005b).

Narrative inquiry seeks to explore “the social, cultural, and institutional narratives within which individuals’ experiences [are] constituted, shaped, expressed and enacted – but in a way that begins and ends that inquiry in the storied lives of the people involved” (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, p. 42). When using this methodology, the researcher understands people as the embodiment of their lived experience, or story, which the researcher uses to find meaning (Clandinin, 2016). Narrative inquiry is distinct from other forms of narrative research by its emphasis on seeking to understand and study experience in and of itself, using story as the most important unit of analysis (Clandinin, 2016; Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). As a result, narrative inquiry inherently aligns with the frameworks of critical consciousness and critical constructivism, both of which emphasize the role of social and power-based influences (Kincheloe, 2005; Freire, 1970, 1974). To seek to understand experience is intrinsically to seek to understand these unseen forces in relationship to the subject of study. Additionally, narrative inquiry as a methodology honors the central tenet of constructivism and critical constructivism: that knowledge and truth are collectively constructed. According to Clandinin (2016), narrative inquiry “is collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus” (p. 17). In other words, participants in narrative inquiry are valued as creators of knowledge and collaborators with the researcher in

search for meaning in experience.

The nature of this study also lends itself to the use of narrative inquiry. The research questions are focused on the experience of college students regarding wokeness and the associated expectations among their peers. As a researcher coming from a critical constructivist epistemology these questions were crafted to intentionally center *experience* rather than discovery of a singular truth. This study is not intended to identify the meaning of wokeness, universally, but rather to discover the way wokeness interplays in the experiences of the participants. Additionally, as previously discussed in the introduction, the very concept of wokeness is deeply rooted in structures of power and social identity. To use another approach could risk over-universalization and flattening of data as independent from participants' unique circumstances. Narrative inquiry makes space for the ambiguous nature of wokeness, asking only to understand the participant experience rather than an objective truth of wokeness in and of itself.

Recruitment. While terminology related to wokeness is relatively common among students in my experience, the lack of a consistent definition and the unlikelihood of finding students through groups or offices identifying themselves explicitly with woke terminology means that I had to seek out potential subjects based on other factors. Therefore, I combined criterion, key informant, and snowball sampling when appropriate.

Jones et al. (2014) defined key informants as individuals with insider status who can help the researcher identify individuals who meet the sample criteria. Based on the informal literature explored in the literature review, as well as my own

professional experience, students who fall under the umbrella of wokeness are often concentrated or engaged in activities, organizations, and conversations dedicated to intersections of identity, social justice, and peer engagement – activities which are also reflected in the literature regarding other kinds of social awareness. This could include campus programming, community activism or engagement efforts, and online communities (Wargo, 2017). Thus, key informants comprised of staff in related units. For the purposes of this study, a recruitment flyer (see Appendix C) along with an introductory blurb describing the study and expectations of participants (see Appendixes A and B) were distributed to members of staff in related departments and offices.

Other methods of recruitment were also used to identify potential participants who many not engage with such traditionally more visible activities and avoid the erasure of valuable perspectives. The same flyers and language distributed through key informants were also distributed through my student affairs professional networks, online professional platforms such as the Student Affairs Professionals Facebook group. The visuals and language used through all mediums were consistent, as noted in appendix A, B, and C. Snowballing from already interviewed participants was also employed to expand the participants. In these cases, participants were asked if they could identify others who would fit the sampling criteria and were invited to share recruitment materials as they felt comfortable.

Sampling. Because of the nature of narrative inquiry and critical constructivism, determining the research population and resulting study sample are critical steps with tremendous impact on the quality and relevance of the collected

data. Narrative inquiry is not intended to produce generalizable, but rather specific and contextualized data (Creswell, 2013). However, the stories and voices which are amplified in both the literature and student affairs practice have implications relating to power and privilege of which one must remain cognizant. My sample size was six participants, which left room for manageable specificity and a range of experiences across a diverse sample. Creswell (2013) suggested that narrative research can be done with as few as one or two participants, however a larger pool can be used to develop a more robust story. In this case, I sought a medium sized sample to cultivate a richer range of experiences. Recruitment efforts yielded an original pool of 18 interested participants. The first 4 respondents were contacted, and the following participants were selected to diversify the sample based on the gathered identities of the first 4. Following that, final participants were eliminated if they were unable to engage after a follow up, or if they did not meet the research population criteria. In the end, 11 participants were contacted, 2 never responded, and 3 were unable to schedule a time to interview face to face.

I bounded the research population through the research question itself: college students who identify as woke to some degree. Participants were recruited from the mid-Atlantic area, not specific to any one institution or institution type. I sought to explore as diverse a sampling of participant experiences as possible. Participants were recruited from across institution type in the region, including minority serving, private, and religious 4-year or community colleges, which resulted in a diverse pool. Participants were ultimately selected in service of a diverse sample across social identities such as race, gender, sexuality, socioeconomic status, and so forth. This

approach is traditionally ideal in qualitative research, as it maximizes the opportunity to unearth difference in perspective (Creswell, 2013). Figure 1 illustrates the participants of this study and their demographic information.

Figure 1. Table detailing participant and their demographic information.²

<u>Pseudonym</u>	<u>Institution</u>	<u>Class Standing</u>	<u>Gender Identity</u>	<u>Racial Identity</u>	<u>Sexual Orientation</u>	<u>Age</u>
Ying	Flagship University	4th year	Trans man	Chinese-American	Pansexual	23
Nicole	Flagship University	3rd year	Female	Multiracial	Heterosexual	20
Alex	City Community College	3rd year	Agender	Mixed	Pansexual	22
Shauna	Flagship University	2nd year	Female	White	Pansexual	20
John	Flagship University	4th year	Male	White - Ashkenazi Jew	Heterosexual	22
Jason ³	Minority Serving University	5th year	Male	African-American	Heterosexual	22

Data collection. The primary method of data collection was semi-structured, face-to-face, in person interviews using a predetermined interview protocol (see Appendix F for full protocol). A semi-structured interview protocol leaves room for follow-up questions and some personalization as the interview progresses, allowing the interviewer to follow the narrative as it may evolve beyond the predetermined questions (Creswell, 2013; 2014). Interviews took approximately 45 to 60 minutes

² Participant gender identities, racial identities, and sexual orientation are reported based on the language used by participants to identify themselves.

³ Researcher note: Jason’s interview was conducted through an American Sign Language interpreter, the transcript for which was reviewed for accuracy by Jason.

and consisted of a series of questions as determined by the interview protocol. Questions were developed through conceptual framework and are rooted in the research questions. For example, questions relating to the first research question included: “Can you share more on how you identify with wokeness/what your relationship with woke is?”, “How did you become woke?”, and “How do you define woke?”. Questions relating to the second research question included: “Tell me about a role model, mentor, or figure in your life you feel like you can look up to regarding being woke”, “Would you have any advice for other students who are trying to become woke?” and “Are there areas in your life that you feel like you’re not woke enough in?” During the interview, I encouraged participants to use language that is comfortable for them in an informal interview style.

As a qualitative researcher, I am considered the research instrument for the study (Creswell, 2014). As such, I refrained from sharing personal details about my beliefs and opinions regarding wokeness to avoid influencing how participants share their narratives but encouraged participants to ask clarifying questions as needed and would happily share my own perspective under those circumstances. About half of the participants inquired after my own definition of wokeness following our interviews. In these cases I would share a general idea of my own idea of wokeness, but emphasize that this was ever changing and dependent on the circumstances – particularly in cases where my understanding as outlined in the researcher narrative conflicted with the views the participant had shared during their interview. Additionally, the researcher narrative and following relationality statement serve the purpose making explicit any bias or assumptions with which I conducted this research

(Creswell, 2014). As a critical constructivist I recognize the influence of my role in co-constructing knowledge and meaning with participants, and therefore shared with participants further details about the nature of the study if asked. Additionally, as I discuss in the trustworthiness section of the study, participants were asked to review and amend their contributions as desired as part of member checking procedures. Member checking describes the act of validating data and analysis by participants themselves to solicit feedback and possible course correction (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data security and participant protection. Particularly in narrative research, where the experiences of participants are laid bare for analysis, it is imperative that researchers maintain an “ethical attitude toward design” (Josselson, 2007, p. 555). I took several steps within this project to ensure that participant information and data were protected, as well as participant well-being. Josselson (2007) reminded us that “in narrative research there is always potential for impact” (p. 558) on not only the participants themselves, but their networks and communities. As such, all participants were kept anonymous and asked to select a pseudonym for themselves. Additionally, their institutions were afforded a pseudonym. The implications and details of their anonymity were explained thoroughly to participants prior to the interview, both verbally and through a consent form (see Appendix E). Additionally, the form detailed the purpose of the study, how their information would be used, the nature of the interview, and information about data security protocols (Josselson, 2007). All data collected as part of this project, such as audio files and transcripts, were digitally stored under password protection through the digital file storage system Google Drive

that only I as the primary researcher could access.

Data Analysis and Coding

Narrative inquiry is centered on the analysis of storytelling, thus interview transcripts provided the data to analyze (Creswell, 2013). However, while this is the method used to elicit stories, the analysis process was guided by the research questions to uncover a collective narrative in the tradition of critical constructivism. Several approaches to analysis exist within the narrative inquiry methodology, yet thematic analysis is most appropriate for a study of this nature. In thematic analysis the researcher identifies themes that emerge from the participants telling their story (Creswell, 2013). In this study, themes were developed through the constant comparative method, coding for themes, and reflection/memoing in a literature-grounded approach.

I completed the coding process using qualitative analysis software in several rounds. Coding is a method of qualitative data analysis which researchers utilize to interpret, or translate, data and in this context will be used to identify and develop the themes in question (Saldaña, 2016). The constant comparative method is a practice in which the researcher seeks to answer questions as they arise from the process of analyzing previous data (Boeije, 2002). In other words, as one set of data (in this context, an interview transcript) was analyzed (coded), I returned to previously coded works to reanalyze in light of the new data. The advantage to using the constant comparative method is that “only when new cases do not bring any new information to light [...] categories can be described as saturated” (Boeiji, 2002, p. 393). Important insights are less likely to be overlooked, and, in accordance with critical

constructivism, participant narratives and researcher analysis come together to create meaning in a unique manner. A priori coding based in the conceptual framework was used at the start of the process; however, in vivo coding was used in the constant comparative context to maintain the centering of participant voices. In vivo coding uses the language and topics of participants to determine the codes used, as opposed to a priori coding, in which the researcher predetermines codes before analysis begins (Saldaña, 2016).

Because the researcher is the research instrument in interview-based research, it was also imperative that I engaged in contextual and reflexive practices to manage my own biases or overinterpretation (Creswell, 2014). For example, without being aware I could have restoried the content of a participant's narrative in a light which reflects my understanding of their wokeness as opposed to their own understanding. Restorying refers to a process wherein the researcher actively analyzes and retells participant narratives into a theoretical or conceptual framework (Creswell, 2013). As a critical constructivist, I value this kind of co-creation of knowledge, but I must balance valuing and adding my own analysis with honoring the lived experiences of participants and the inherent truth and value therein. Memoing throughout the research and analysis process provided space for me to reflect on my personal interpretation and relationship with the data. Memos are notes or written reflection by the researcher describing emergent themes, points of analysis which may warrant follow up or further investigation, and questions of relationality, conflict, or personal relationship to the work (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Researcher Relationality and Social Location

By stating my relationality to this work, rather than positionality, I intend to decolonize an approach to research which considers the researcher to be outside, or other from the work. Rather, in line with Freire's (1970) understanding of critical consciousness and Patel's (2016) argument for decolonizing education research, I seek to identify the ways in which I am part of, connected to, in, and of the research.

I come to my work as a practitioner and a scholar with an agenda to advance social equity and dismantle systems of oppression. Under no circumstance do I intend for my work to be taken as a denouncement of social progressivism in students. Rather, I seek to better understand the inner workings of student wokeness and social justice work so as to better support it. My socially constructed identities locate me as a biracial, African-American, queer woman. As a result of my experiences based on these identities, I am personally dedicated to and invested in the advancement of social justice. At the same time, I am upper middle class, am able-bodied, a United States citizen, and cisgender. A combination of these privileges has significantly contributed to my ability to reach this position of researcher – in and of itself a privilege. All these factors have impacted my approach to wokeness, including my experience of social awareness as a college student, which I remain cognizant of at all stages of this project.

It is important to recognize the lenses from which I approach this work as a researcher, because, as previously discussed, my own contributions as a critical constructivist partially shaped the development and findings of this project. Indeed, were it not for my identities as a person, professional, and researcher, it is likely that

an interest in this work may have never developed. Additionally, the way I show up in spaces, particularly as a researcher, certainly affected my interactions with participants in an explicitly face-to-face interaction. While some of my identities are invisible, for example sexual orientation, others are hyper visible, such as being a person of color. How participants interpret my identities likely influenced the level of rapport I was able to develop and the nature of the information they were willing to share. Thus, being aware of those influences helped to develop an interview protocol and mannerisms which mitigate potential negative effects of this. On the other hand, students with similar visible identities to mine may have been more inclined to share with someone they perceive as similar to them. As a researcher, I also worked to avoid exploiting such interpretations and avoid influencing their interpretation of the subject matter. Finally, as I discuss in the trustworthiness section, activities such as memoing, member checking, and external auditing ensured that my relationality and identities were not inappropriately influential on the analysis of the data.

Assumptions. I make several assumptions as I approach this work. I have already addressed some of my conscious assumptions, including the assumption that social justice awareness, whether it be wokeness, critical consciousness, or some other form, is desirable in students. I believe that it is necessary for the promotion of equity and deconstruction of systems of oppression – which I also assume are good and worthwhile goals. Additionally, I believe, based on the works of Freire (1970, 1974) as well as my personal experience, that social justice awareness or wokeness is not static. I do not assume that it is necessarily universal, stage-based, or linear. Thus, as discussed, I did not from the outset assume that results of this work would be clear

cut or generalizable.

Other assumptions stem from my subconscious, likely the result of my identities and socialization. For example, as a professional I have had to resist the judgement that the wokeness of students whose wokeness alienates others has less value than other kinds of wokeness. This is an assumption which I resist, not only because of the implications on my interpretation of data, but also to maintain rapport and avoid alienating participants. Moreover, I cannot assume that those like me, whether in ideology or social identity, are *like me*. In some ways I am an insider to this population – I do sometimes identify as woke and recognize myself in my students often. On the other hand, I am an outsider as an administrator, often perceived as the enemy to student activists. According to Chaves' (2008) spectrum of insider/outsiderness positionality I fall as an external-insider. I worked diligently to avoid over-identification or reliance on shared identities or understandings of wokeness with participants, but also recognized that I may have been uniquely positioned with a nuanced perspective towards interpretation (Chaves, 2008). Regardless, critical reflection was crucial to maintaining a balanced approach to analysis and rapport-building with participants.

Trustworthiness

The primary means of ensuring trustworthiness of this study was to employ member checking, reflexivity, and external auditing. By sharing the interview transcript with the participants, they were afforded the opportunity to ensure I had not only accurately recorded the conversation but also that their words are reflective of what they intended to communicate. Clarifications or omissions were made at this

point. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), this kind of member checking is the “most critical technique for establishing credibility” (p. 314).

Additionally, engaging in external auditing (seeking input from an expert unconnected to the study) and peer debriefing (seeking input from a peer who is knowledgeable about the subject) helped assess the validity of the work as the study unfolds and provides the opportunity to course correct if needed (Creswell, 2014). Input from an external auditor helped to ensure qualitative validity through the examination of analysis methodologies and findings, where a peer debriefer ensured that the content of the study resonates with those outside the research team and offered the opportunity for a difference of interpretation (Creswell, 2014). While this occurred during the coding stage, peer debriefers were heavily utilized during the thematic analysis stage wherein codes were condensed into themes. Debriefs were used to validate the grouping of codes, the development of themes, and to further explore implications of those themes.

Finally, as previously discussed, self-reflective activities on my part were critical for properly understanding and clarifying any bias which may influence the study. Not only is this a core element of good qualitative research, it also represents my critical constructivist epistemology and awareness of the potentially fluid nature of wokeness.

Bounding the Study

No amount of careful planning and research design can eliminate limitations in undertaking a study. In the case of this study, several boundaries exist. First, with such a broad research population and limited sample, I could not possibly hope to

address all aspects of wokeness as it relates to all populations of college students. While this has been discussed as an asset to the project through the core tenets of narrative inquiry and critical constructivism, this work cannot be, and does not seek to be, universalizable. Similarly, because I did not focus on the experiences of members of a particular social identity (students of color, for example) or subgroup (such as non-traditional students) this study could not showcase important differences or similarities across communities when it comes to wokeness. Again, this work did not seek to be representative of any population other than the participants themselves, but care was taken to avoid the over-privileging of more easily accessible or dominant narratives. Finally, my own assumptions of what constitutes wokeness, based on its colloquial use, my personal experience, and limited literature, could have skewed the criteria I used to identify potential participants. I worked with great care to avoid inappropriately limiting the sample as this could have potentially affected the kinds of responses participants give, making the data pool available for analysis and findings overly representative of a skewed sample.

Summary

In this study I utilized the narrative inquiry methodology in order gain an understanding of the meaning of woke as understood by students who identify as such, and to explore associated intra-group expectations and experiences of the participants. I recruited a diverse sample of six participants from the mid-Atlantic region of the United States from a variety of institutions and institution types. Participants, who were current college students who identify as woke to some degree, were located using criterion sampling and key informants.

I collected data via one-time semi-structured face-to-face interviews with each participant, wherein I used a predetermined interview protocol to guide the conversation. The interview protocol was developed using the research questions and theoretical framework as a guide. Transcripts from these interviews provided the primary data for analysis, alongside my personal memoing as a researcher. Using thematic analysis, I coded transcripts for a priori codes, and developed in vivo codes through the constant comparative method. This allowed me to nimbly respond to the data as they emerge, leading to a more organic set of themes.

To ensure trustworthiness, member checking, peer debriefing, reflexivity (memoing), and external auditing were utilized. By keeping my process and analysis transparent to peers, experts, and participants, I greatly reduced the possibility of misrepresentation or inappropriate researcher bias. The study itself was bound by its research questions and methodology as a narrative inquiry project seeking to maximize variables and reduce generalizability. Therefore, findings do not represent all experiences or interpretations of wokeness among students. These questions, while important, are outside the scope of this study.

Chapter 4: Findings

In this chapter, I provide a description of the findings from this study with assistance from direct quotes from the participants, whose narratives illuminate the salient themes derived from the analysis methods described in Chapter 3. It is important to note, per the conceptual framework and boundaries of this study, that these findings are informed by the demographics and positionality of the participants (see figure 1). Overall, five themes emerged from the data analysis process across the two research questions. These themes were: (1) wokeness as a series of expectations, (2) an internal process, (3) interactions with others, (4) the invisible line, and (5) mismatched expectations. The following sections provide further detail of each theme.

How do Students Make Sense of Wokeness?

The primary research question of this study was how do self-identified woke students in the U.S. make sense of wokeness? As such, the following three themes help to uncover the meaning of woke as understood by woke college students, the process by which they developed that meaning, as well as salient associated experiences, systems, or artifacts.

Wokeness as a series of expectations. The most prominent theme which emerged from this study was the participants understanding of woke and wokeness as a series or set of expectations rather than an identity, process, or political ideology. To participants, the most important elements of wokeness were what a woke person does, says, or believes – not what they call themselves or their affiliations. Ying iterated that “because despite whatever you might call yourself, if you do not walk the

walk, as you talk the talk, then it's pretty much useless.” The idea of measurable behaviors, actions, or mindsets were central to how participants made sense of what it is to be woke.

Of these expectations, I describe three that emerged as notably salient for participants. The first of these expectations was around awareness, particularly regarding current events and political realities. As Shauna put it, “someone who is woke is someone who is very aware about our current social-political climate.” Participants reliably expressed that wokeness requires a higher level of awareness than one might passively develop as a result of lived experience. Even more importantly, most participants talked about a woke person being someone who intentionally seeks out greater awareness of the world. John stated the following in regard to wokeness:

I guess it's a little more active, and if you're just aware of something you might know it, but if you're, I guess, woke, you're more actively seeking out knowledge and to an even greater extent maybe taking action to, I don't know, do what you think is the right thing to do socially.

This example illustrates the connection between the expectation of awareness and the expectation of action - the second salient expectation among participants. While awareness was key, participants also expected that a woke person *do* something with that knowledge - though there was no consistent expectation of how *much* a woke person should be expected to do. For example, two participants, Ying and Alex, thought that a woke person should be willing to stand up for their beliefs even if it means making sacrifice or risking something of themselves, while Nicole, Jason, and

John shared that as long as someone seeks to make a difference in some small way they have met their expectations of wokeness.

The third salient expectation was that a woke person do the work necessary to see the world from outside the perspective provided by their social location.

“Empathy, essentially,” summarized Ying. For John that important work had to start with the self:

I think definitely in order for someone to be woke they have to consider their own identity first, and I think that's an important thing, is you have to consider your own place in relation to everyone else, and so I'd say that it's definitely important.

Jason echoed this sentiment as well, emphasizing that woke people “have a bias just like everyone does. And I think they're well aware of their biases. They've confronted them, they were trying to do something about them.” This third expectation then relates, for Jason, to the importance of taking action, however small – *doing* something with the awareness and empathy gained through wokeness. Similarly, Alex shared that some people “have this great understanding about their own issues and how they face them, whether that’s poverty or racism or homophobia,” but then fail to translate that understanding to understanding other systems of oppression, or do not put in the work to see how those issues and identities affect how they relate to others and the world. To Alex, these people had not met their expectations of wokeness and thus were not woke.

For Jason, this idea was the central piece of wokeness, not merely an element of it. He summarized his definition of wokeness thusly:

So I believe means it's a person who knows where they stand in this world, to know what kind of benefit they have to offer, someone who's really interested in social justice issues about things that are going out in the world. Not only in their own local community, but on the larger scale minority community, I think that's key, that larger scale issue. That's how I would define it.

To that a similar point, Shauna recounted an instance during an LGBTQ+ student organization meeting when a white member suggested that the group do more programming to address the needs of queer students of color on campus. “For a moment, I was like, wow,” she said, “thinking of a community you're not a part of [...] when I see that, I'm like that person is probably woke because taking into consideration the thoughts and feelings of people who you are not like is super important.” The action that Shauna witnessed this student taking was the result of an awareness that queer students of color have differing needs which may not be met by the organization, thus achieving wokeness in several ways. Ying tied these thoughts together when he shared:

But I do feel at its core [woke] just means that people who are quote, unquote woke are more aware of the social issue surrounding them. Not necessarily only pertaining to them, but also just the peoples at large and not necessarily even only their nation. Perhaps just, the intersectionality of all sorts of cultures and socioeconomic backgrounds together.

Alex, Jason, Shauna, and Ying together illuminate the connection they hold between the first two expectations of awareness and action to the third expectation of one's ability to see outside their own experience. In a way, these and other expectations are

interdependent, almost like an ecosystem. To meet one often necessitates meeting another.

It is important, however, to acknowledge that participants did not all agree on their expectations. All participants mentioned at least one expectation they had regarding what it means to be woke that was not echoed by others. For example, Alex emphasized their expectation that a woke person should question all perceived authority, always, and that this expectation was central to their understanding of wokeness. However, this was not addressed in the same way by other participants. These variations illustrate the elusive and highly personalized understanding of wokeness and serves as a reflection of the second salient theme, internal meaning making.

An internal process. The majority of the participants described the processes by which they developed their definition or understanding of wokeness, and the associated expectations, as an internal one which took place over time. In other words, they made meaning of wokeness through their own analysis and perspective-taking in a way which was relevant to their lived experience, rather than as recipients of a prescribed external definition. Indeed, Ying shared that while others may have varying understandings of wokeness, “I think it's something I developed internally because people use the term, but no one actually defines it. And Urban Dictionary, who actually looks at that?” Participants acknowledged that wokeness is relatively undefined in popular culture, a factor which Ying acknowledged here was partially why he had to make meaning on his own.

Additionally, because participants were making meaning of wokeness by internal means, they felt autonomy to change or adjust their understanding of wokeness and the expectations therein as they encountered new realities or perspectives which challenged their worldview. Shauna noted that “I had to go through these moments of discomfort where I was like, what do I do with differing information in my head in order to move into betterness?” Wherein betterness referred to a more idealized understanding and embodiment of wokeness. Similarly, Nicole described the 2016 election of president Donald Trump as a key moment for her in developing her current understanding of wokeness. She stated:

[...] when Donald Trump was elected to politics, this came with a waking realization that, “Oh, what does this mean for the minority groups?” I know, especially there was some questions on how he's treated women, how he's treated minorities, how he treats immigrants, really led to this realization, and I feel like, at least this is the first time I remember woke being a term used on a more day-to-day basis. So, I feel like that had a lot to do with how I've shaped my definition of it.

Nicole's conceptualization of wokeness changed in response to the political environment around her and her realization of the challenges of particular social groups, including groups with which she identified. As a result of that shift in her worldview she described having the ability and means to shape or reshape her own definition of wokeness.

Alex referenced this autonomy as well when they described some of the disagreements they have with others who have made a different kind of meaning from

wokeness. Alex believed that both political conservatives and liberals could be woke, unlike other people they knew who feel differently. Rather than feeling pressured to conform their understanding of wokeness to that of the majority, however, they reported:

I feel like people who are super super liberal but have internalized -isms and they're like "what wokeness really is is being super super progressive, and being super super liberal." I feel like they tend to think that I'm not super woke because I will accept conservative people as woke. There's nothing wrong with a conservative point of view. They will then think I'm not woke enough because I accept that.

By accepting that other disagree with them, Alex exhibited their sense of independence where wokeness is concerned, comfortable in their ability to extract meaning from wokeness autonomously – even when in direct contradiction to others.

There was some deviation, or even limitation to this theme, however. In particular, one participant, John, described his meaning of wokeness as being almost entirely derived from the meaning his friends had already made: "I'd say [they had] a pretty decent role in shaping my beliefs and stuff because I'm living with them so I kind of have to adapt my own lifestyle to their own [...]" John repeatedly shared the ways his community of friends had shaped his understanding of wokeness, with very little reference to any internal processes. Additionally, even many of the remaining participants whose processes were much more internal and autonomous shared a level of insecurity at the conclusion of the interview around their authority regarding wokeness. Nicole, who previously talked about the internal process she went through,

asked “Do I even know what woke means? I had that little conversation on my walk over here. I'm like, I know I said that I was in the survey, but am I really qualified?” Other participants reported similar last-minute doubts about their qualifications or worthiness to be interviewed. This illustrates that while participants experienced autonomy when it came to understanding wokeness, that did not necessarily translate to authority.

Exceptions did emerge regarding this theme. Considering the history of wokeness detailed in Chapter 1, this theme emerges as almost contrary to the role of wokeness as a “black activist watch word” (Pulliam-Moore, 2017, para. 1) historically rooted in anti-racist resistance. The collective nature of wokeness appears to be lost. It is possible that this is related to the racial identities of the participants, particularly in light of Jason’s narrative, the only participant who identified as African-American. Jason situated his understanding of wokeness squarely within his Blackness and the community relationships therein. When asked how he developed his understanding of wokeness, Jason replied:

Well, I guess I would say based on my upbringing from my grandmother. She would give me a lot of books with people of color. The first book that actually I think really made an impact on me was an autobiography of Malcolm X. Because my grandmother knew him personally, they exchanged letters. [...] And then I got that autobiography and then I started learning more about the world around me. [...] [Before I read the Autobiography of Malcolm X] I had a very strongly developed Black identity. I knew where I stood, I knew the importance of collaborating with the POC community. But I wouldn't say that

I was woke, because I still had all these biases against other people of color and their communities.

Jason made sense of wokeness by means of deeper engagement with his own community. Not only the larger community through his Black identity, but also a personal community through his grandmother and her own relationship with Malcolm X. Additionally, Jason made no mention of changing his understanding of wokeness over time. Thus, it is possible that while participants generally made meaning independently, this may be correlated with racial identity and community connection to the roots of wokeness in the United States.

Comfort with difference. As part of the internal meaning making process described by participants, acknowledging and making room for differing definitions of wokeness from others also emerged as salient. As previously discussed by Alex, participants identified that while they had made meaning and experienced autonomy in their definition of wokeness, so too had others. Participants were comfortable with this kind of deviation, knowing that their understanding may conflict with others. To this end, Ying specifically articulated the importance of context in how one comes to understand wokeness:

So it definitely does vary from culture to culture, country to country, age by age. It's important to keep in mind that not everyone has the same context [...]
So definitely the baseline of wokeness, where people are aware is still there, but it's just what they're aware of and how much they are aware of it.

Here Ying was discussing specifically the differing views on cultural appropriation he had encountered from Asian Americans and people living in Asia. To him, that his

friends in Asia did not see culturally appropriative practices as harmful or something to fight against as a woke person did not mean that their understanding of wokeness was incorrect or that they were not woke, rather it was contextually bound. Jason felt similarly, iterating how he had come to view different approaches, or lack thereof, to social justice issues: “we're all products of a system. We all have different backgrounds, different upbringings, educational levels.”

Participants also described ways that even individuals within the same social circumstances could differ. Shauna, for example, shared about a time that a friend of hers held more extreme liberal views than she did: “In the moment with my liberal friend, I thought personally, you having a more extreme view than me does not necessarily mean that I am not woke and that you are more woke than I am.” For many of the participants this kind of flexibility developed from the internal processes they had already gone through, leaving them with the understanding that others, or for that matter themselves, may come to change or further develop their understanding of wokeness as time progresses and they increased their worldview or interacted with different realities. “There's certain things that you can generally say that's woke,” shared John, “but it's so broad and stuff that it's still very up in the air I feel like, and susceptible to change as time goes on.” In this way, the very autonomy that those who felt they had regarding their understanding of wokeness translated to how they managed challenges from or differences with others.

Interactions with others. The final theme which emerged for the first research question describes how participants made meaning from and developed their expectations of wokeness as a result their experiences interacting with others,

particularly those who were different from them. John shared that he only really started thinking about wokeness after coming to college and interacting with different communities than he had in high school. As he started engaging with peers who he now considers woke, his meaning making process regarding wokeness was kickstarted. While John appeared to have less autonomy in how he understands wokeness than other participants, as previously discussed, engagement with others was still key to his process regardless. On the other hand, Alex, who was strongly autonomous in their meaning making processes, described their journey of understanding wokeness thusly:

I used to be like, “woke is basically: you’re liberal!” and that’s not necessarily what I think now. And I think my definition has developed as I’ve met people. Cuz I’ve met people who are like “yeah, I’m totally woke!” and I’m like “no.... you really seem like you’re not asking any questions and you’re just accepting this.” It’s that whole, at first you’re in opposition. Like, me personally - first I was in opposition to conservative people. And I was like “ahh, only liberal people have brains.” Then I met liberal people who didn’t, and I was like “mmmm maybe that’s not how it works.” And so the definition changed for me because of the people that I interacted with.

In essence, Alex started out with an understanding of wokeness, perhaps generated internally or adopted from others, which was then narrowed and adjusted over time as they interacted with, were challenged by, or questioned others. For Alex in particular, that engagement with others who they found lacking in wokeness was key to them adjusting expectations as they further uncovered their own values. In a similar but

different vein, Shauna shared how encountering someone with different identities and values who challenged her own behavior led her to more deeply engage internally with what she felt wokeness was, or how it should be enacted. In this example, Shauna, a white woman, had unconsciously made a racially insensitive remark to her Black friend. The friend challenged her, and when Shauna realized she had done something which was not potentially not in line with wokeness she experienced stress which led to further analysis. Shauna recounted,

There was a lot of cognitive dissidence there for at least couple of weeks where I was like, if I'm a woke person, then that means everything I say is woke, but there's this person who says that something that I said was not woke. Does that mean I'm not a woke person? Does that mean that I slipped up? There was a lot of confusion on my own part where I was like trying to bring these two things together and make sense of them. How can I say that I'm this type of person, but also say something that is so indicative to someone who was not that type of person?

These two examples in particular highlight the consistent theme among participants that interacting with others was key, perhaps even necessary, to developing a relationship with wokeness.

Notably, participants articulated that *encountering difference* was the most important element of engaging with others. As Nicole asserted, "I feel like it ultimately comes down to: how much have you seen of the differences in other people?" Additionally, Jason asserted that he could tell someone was genuinely woke if they were not only learning about issues outside of their community, but also

“willing to talk to all different kinds of people, and [have] a diverse circle of friends.” Whether through their own narratives of breaking out of what several participants called “bubbles,” or coming to terms with the ways their own social identities are oppressed by others, the participants were certain that without those experiences they would never have come to truly understand wokeness or even become woke themselves.

The role of community. Interaction with others quickly became community for participants, who all felt they had a community of wokeness or of woke people to engage with regularly. Whether formal, such as through student organizations, or informal, as in a group of friends, an online network, or even a generation, these communities were crucial in the maintenance of wokeness for participants. Shauna described these strong community relationships as ones of reciprocity and consciousness-raising. To Shauna, educating others was central to her wokeness, and she found that by engaging in community she not only had the opportunity share her own knowledge or awareness, but could receive in equal measure. “I think that in those moments of education, I have found I can give this knowledge to you, and that way we can both get a little bit higher on the wokeness scale.” In this way, being in community with others not only provided stimulus for internal meaning making, but also created the infrastructure for members to raise to higher ‘levels’ of wokeness than they could have alone, a phenomenon which will be further explored in the fourth theme. Jason shared similar sentiment, describing his relationship with his college friends as deeply important to his development as a woke person, the means by which he was able to encounter that critical difference “because before I met them,

right, I constantly was always thinking about, oh, well these are how things are in America. Right? I was very isolated, [...] So yeah, I've learned so much from them.” Jason’s group of friends included folks from a diversity of backgrounds and identities, which he shared played an “absolutely” important role in his increased wokeness.

Additionally, a woke community provided not only inspiration or means towards an ends of increased wokeness for participants, but a major source of comfort and support. “They're a huge support network for me,” said Ying, who shared having a strained relationship with his family because of their non-acceptance of his gender and sexual orientation, “and I guess I tried to do my best to reciprocate that because it's rough out there and unfortunately, a lot of us do have a bunch of the same issues, in terms of family.” These woke support networks showed up in several interviews, as participants shared how draining it can be *being* woke. While engaging difference was critical to participants, they largely acknowledged that it could be a difficult thing to choose to do. For example, Nicole shared that:

I think it comes back to having the support network, and just knowing people [...]. I do feel like I learned so much by surrounding myself with all these different people, but sometimes it can be a lot. Knowing there are people, like a support group I have to fall back on, whether it's just being reassuring and doing something different than outside the books.

Nicole’s understanding of her network highlights how community is not only essential for thinking about and being woke, but also in supporting one another through that process.

How do Students Perceive the Expectations of Wokeness in Relation to their Woke Peers?

The secondary research question of this study was how do self-identified woke students in the U.S. perceive the expectations of being woke in relation to their woke peers? The following explores the final two themes emerging from the data which help to illuminate the relationship participants have with their expectations of wokeness and how that relates to their peer and community relationships.

The invisible line. Participants consistently reported that while engagement with difference and even those who disagree with you is critical, there exists a line which they were not willing to cross. The line here refers to who the participants were or were not willing to engage with or consider part of their community based on their adherence to expectations of wokeness. Thus, while an individual may not meet the expectations of wokeness, that did not necessarily exclude them from being able to join in participant's woke communities or maintain relationships with participants. Instead, an additional threshold existed, somewhere 'below' wokeness, that determined whether or not participants were willing to accept others into their lives. For example, Nicole shared that when it comes to forming personal relationships "I don't personally care if you consider yourself woke, if maybe I don't consider you woke. I feel like the most important aspect of it is being able to approach things with an open mind." For Nicole being in community with someone who did not meet the expectation of having an open mind felt impossible, regardless if none of the other expectations of wokeness were being met. She also described another important line to her: "to take action in any malicious form to either prevent or to cause any distress

of any type on someone else, that to me is too far.” Even Jason, who initially reported that he would be willing to engage with anyone, that “the discussion is important no matter what,” eventually admitted “I think it's going to depend on the person's body language. I can tell how they're thinking, how they're responding. That's one of the biggest factors I think when I'm looking for [...] If you just look like you don't care, then I'm not going to waste my energy.”

Importantly, participants did not agree on the where this line existed – it was different for each participant and based on their lived experiences and temperaments. For some the line was hard and impermeable, but for others it was more fuzzy or contextual, like for Nicole. For Ying those lines were much more defined. Describing an ex-boyfriend who did not react well to being approached about some racist behaviors, Ying shared:

So yeah, I guess at the end of the day, because he refused to see that like, “Hey, this is not about you, for one, and two you are saying things that are actually really insensitive and erasing other people's identities and issues.”

He is no longer welcome within our circles, so good riddance bad rubbish.

Failing to reach the watermark of learning from mistakes or accepting criticism was a game ender for Ying in this case, with no wiggle room for negotiation. Not only did Ying find this behavior unacceptable, but so to did his community who supported the ousting of this individual. It rang true for Alex as well that certain behaviors which may be permissible in casual relationships or engagement were not so for close relationships, particularly in a partner.

I don't wanna have to be the only one being like "well are you sure that's true?" I want you to also be like "yeah, but I didn't understand. Like, I either didn't understand or I didn't fully convince - they didn't have enough sources for me." And then of course, no -isms. No -isms.

For Alex the watermark for their partner was much higher than it was for their friends or community members. In other words, their line was subject to change depending on the circumstance or relationship with the person in question.

Wokeness as a scale. This invisible line reflected another reality that participants described: wokeness as existing on a scale or along a spectrum. Thus, as far as participants were concerned, one is not simply woke or not woke, but rather positioned somewhere on a sliding scale. John shared that there was no on or off switch for wokeness, not necessarily any 'ah ha!' moment: "it just feels like a gradual thing, learning and gaining more wokeness or awareness as you, I don't know, gain different experiences through college and stuff like that." Perhaps beyond even a flat two-dimensional scale, the visual of a radar chart better illustrates how participants felt about measuring wokeness. Wokeness existed in several different arenas for people, and as Shauna put it "there are always ways that some people are less woke than others in certain areas." In other words, having an increased level of wokeness in one area, such as regarding race and racism, did not necessarily translate to having an equal level of wokeness, or awareness, in another area, such as disability and ableism. The expectations of wokeness described in the first theme could be met or not met in any one of these areas differently than another, and there exists room for

improvement along that scale of wokeness – even if one has already met the base expectations.

Participants strongly felt that there was no end to wokeness, no fully achieved state. Nicole shared, “Well, it's like we said, you're scale from 0 to 100. Not that I think you could be either extreme, on how woke you are. I'd probably fall, I'd put myself around 70%-ish towards woke?” Despite existing on a linear scale for her, she expressed that “I wouldn't say I'm like 100% woke. I don't necessarily know that anyone could be.” Participants agreed that perfection was not attainable in wokeness, but that one could strive to be better, something which some participants included in their expectations.

The neutral zone. As wokeness fell on a scale for participants, they also identified that along that spectrum exists a *neutral zone*, wherein one is not necessarily woke but neither are they “awful.” The invisible line described previously serves as the buffer between this neutral zone and truly unacceptable, encompassing the behaviors or traits which participants were willing to accept in their communities or relationships. In this way the neutral zone essentially encompasses acceptable behaviors which may not be woke. As an illustration of this theme, Shauna described her relationship with her stepfather, whom she felt was not woke, even racist at times, but working on improvement:

I think the two ends of the spectrum and awful and he's not awful. He's not quite woke either. I think he's drifting somewhere in the middle. But, that's not the worse place in the world to be, especially considering that he does have

the most important thing of he's willing to learn for the most part, for the most part.

Because her stepfather fell within this neutral area, she felt comfortable continuing a relationship with him and even working to educate him so as to move him further along towards wokeness. Similarly, Nicole identified that she herself started within this zone, as opposed to ever being on the “awful” end of the spectrum, largely due to her diverse upbringing: “I feel like, since coming to [Flagship], I've definitely become more woke, more aware, I think. I came from, I would say, a pretty diverse background, so I would say I maybe started out maybe neutral, around neutral wokeness.” Harkening back to the first research question, Nicole identified that because of her multiracial family and the social mobility her father experienced in his lifetime, she came to college with an already robust set of experiences interacting with difference – just not quite enough to escape the neutral zone yet.

Self-protection. An explanation emerged from the data as well regarding *why* these invisible lines might exist. Those behaviors or sentiments which push beyond the limit of what participants were willing to engage with had largely to do with self-preservation or self-protection from discursive violence or oppression. As Ying crystallized: “it's [...] a way of protecting myself because why would I throw myself into a hostile environment where I know that people won't accept me, right? I experience enough of that from my family. I don't need any more of it.” Engaging across difference was important to participants, but they were not willing to endure abuse or oppressive behavior towards that end. Nicole, who identified as multiracial, for example, described how the pain of interacting with her outwardly racist white

grandmother had affected the kinds of relationships she wanted in her life: “I feel like her lack of wokeness has caused me to be more selective of who I surround myself with, in a sense of I feel like that's why I typically surround myself with more woke people.” Her previous experiences engaging with racism had led her to adjust where her line was and for what she was or was not willing to cross it.

Not all self-preservation was rooted in oppression, however. John, who identified as white, male, heterosexual, and cis-gender relayed that his line was built around whether or not he felt he was going to be looked down upon, or judged for his views not being woke *enough*. “I don't know, there have been a few situations where I've explained things that have happened to me and they've kind of just judged me on it,” he articulated, speaking about a roommate of his who he considers woke. “So I guess just having much stronger opinions on certain subjects makes me kind of back away from talking about it with them.” That being said, for John this line was much more permeable, as he recognized that these people existed in his close community. However, he was more inclined to self-censor or limit the topics he would engage with such people on, even if they had a close relationship. On the other hand, for some participants it was a matter of energy expenditure and return on that investment. Jason, for example, shared that it's “sometimes tiring to having to constantly explain yourself,” that that calculation of energy cost to possible outcome was an equation he felt he needed to balance when engaging with peers who are not woke. If someone appeared unwilling to learn, then no amount of engagement was going to change that for that individual. Thus, for those participants their line was built around willingness to learn.

Mismatched expectations. The final theme addresses the differences in how participants applied their expectations of wokeness to others versus themselves. Often, participants described an expectation, or lack of expectation, they had regarding others, and then demonstrated how they themselves did not meet that expectation, varying on whether or not they were conscious of this disparity. Sometimes participants fell short of an expectation they felt others should meet, while at other times they held themselves to higher expectations than they were requiring from others. For example, as noted in the first theme, Alex made it clear that the ability to see beyond the issues affecting you as an individual (such as racism or homophobia) and applying that to understanding the struggles of others was imperative for wokeness. Yet, later they described how they were able to empathize with individuals with mobility issues, because they too faced mobility challenges, but could not extend that same empathy to autistic peers. Interestingly, Alex did not connect how they felt differently about these varying kinds of disability: “So I don’t know, I could never explain why there’s a difference, I think it’s just autistic people, or autistic folks, with bigger triggers or more consistent triggers, just affect me more. I don’t know.” Similarly, Nicole shared how important it was to her that others maintain an open mind and be willing to accept criticism and different viewpoints. She did not like the idea of people “pushing” their wokeness on others or expressing that “This is woke. You have to be this way.” However, when describing what it is like to have her own wokeness questioned or challenged by others, she shared that:

depending on how they're saying it, and the tone of it, [it] makes me question their wokeness a little bit. It's like if you're coming at me for not being woke,

but I'm an educated person, if I've made it known that I have done my background and here is why I stand that way, and made it known that I'm pretty open minded [...] but if you're not able to have that open mindedness to accept *my* beliefs, I feel like that's where another thing that might trigger me to think [...] I might consider your set of beliefs woke, but if you don't have the open mindedness to accept someone else's beliefs, maybe that decreases how woke you actually are.

This process of comparing open-mindedness betrays a contradiction. Whereas someone may not be as open minded as Nicole would want, she then felt it apt to reject their beliefs and even demote their wokeness as a result.

On the other hand, Shauna felt aware of her contradiction when she stated “I'm a feminist. I'm a queer person. I should be this person who's like liberal and knows everything, but it's like, you can't know everything.” Despite feelings strongly that wokeness exists on a scale, and that no one, including herself, could be expected to reach the top of that scale, Shauna still felt that she herself should somehow embody that perfection. In this way she was holding herself to higher expectations than she did others, such as her stepfather.

Associated pain. This mismatch of expectations more often than not led to dissonance and pain for participants. For example, John, who felt similarly to Shauna in that he expected higher of himself than he necessarily did others, shared that when keeping up with current events, something important to him, “it'll talk about people who are doing good things and then I'm just like, well, here I am, not doing anything, or *something*.” John felt this way despite participating in many campus programs

dedicated to social justice and volunteering his time and talents with the community. Despite the fact that he was indeed taking action, the feeling that he had to do even more than he expected of others was, as he put it, “just additional stress.” When he felt like he was not being woke “enough” John said, “it can make you feel a little guilty sometimes, or bad about yourself.” Along the same lines, Shauna shared that dwelling on the negative feelings generated by recognizing that she has made a mistake, or not lived up to her expectations, motivated her to do better: “the discomfort that I currently have the things that I used to do when I wasn't woke, sort of propels me to no longer do those things.” Yet, Shauna also believed that others should grow from their mistakes in “positive ways, creating a space of acceptance, instead of ignorance and hatred.” By not allowing herself that same grace offered to others, Shauna spent more time thinking about how she has been “a bad person” which she characterized as being “not a great feeling.”

Jason shared a narrative around preconceived notions he held towards Saudi Arabian culture. After attending a Saudi culture event at his school, realizing that he was holding other groups to a higher expectation than his own, Jason shared “I felt like I was spoiled.” However, he felt able to contextualize his judgement in the larger scheme, stating:

I can't take all the blame. Yes, it's my responsibility to change it. But there were a lot of people in the educational system teaching me what they considered important for me to know in terms of history. And in some ways I'm kind of dumb or ignorant. I'll take responsibility that, but it's not all my fault.

Other participants who recognized how they were not expecting the same of themselves as others also expressed pain. When Alex shared about their feelings towards autistic people, they described knowing that they were holding themselves differently in that area as feeling “awful”:

And it does feel awful. I don't like it. And sometimes I'm like, “ah, dammit.”

I just get down on myself. But then I'm like, “You can't be perfect.” No one can be perfect. If we wanted someone to be perfect you're gonna be real sad.

Questioning their own wokeness because of differing expectations, or finding themselves questioned by others, proved to be consistently upsetting for participants, whether or not they were conscious of the differing expectations. Regardless of this pain, participants did not discuss how they might work to balance or shift how they experience themselves as woke people as opposed to others, simply expressing that it was difficult or distressing.

Summary

Overall, five themes emerged from this research. The first theme described how participants made sense of wokeness as a set of expectations that a woke person adheres to or meets. The second theme addressed how participants developed that meaning through internal processes which provided them the autonomy to change and further develop their understanding over time. As part of this understanding, participants acknowledged that others have gone through similar processes and thus may hold a different understanding of wokeness than they do, and that this difference of understanding is not only tolerable, but comfortable. In the third theme, participants identified encountering difference through interacting with others as key

to the meaning making process described in the second theme. Participants identified engaging in community as crucial to developing and understanding of wokeness. The fourth theme detailed how participants conceptualized wokeness as existing on a scale with a neutral zone, wherein they were willing to tolerate non-woke individuals. However an invisible line demarcated behaviors or ideas which were not to be tolerated, often as a means of self-protection. Finally, the fifth theme described how participants differentially applied expectations of wokeness to themselves and others, which often led to dissonance or pain.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Examining the themes which emerged from the participants' stories reveals both convergence and divergence with the literature as discussed in Chapter 2, as well as with the theories of the conceptual framework used in this study. In this chapter, I present a discussion of these findings, as well as an exploration of implications for practice and further potential research.

Discussion

Convergence with student perspectives. Overall, the participants of this study shared experiences, feelings, and opinions about wokeness which reflected the sentiments of other college students as discussed in the review of informal literature such as student newspapers and blogs. The three salient expectations of wokeness described by the first theme in Chapter 4, awareness, action, and the ability to see beyond your own social location, appear to mirror almost exactly the loose associations of wokeness to self-awareness, awareness of current issues, and taking action as discussed by Romero (2016). Similarly, as participants identified that wokeness was not dependent on identity, or even political affiliation for the most part, this aligned with the work of student journalists like Kassebaum (2016) who wrote that "being woke is the act of being familiar with current events and having the desire to do something about them" (para. 2). The themes which emerged from the participant's stories also dovetailed with the work of other student journalists and bloggers (Baddal, 2016; Levenson, 2018). In particular, the role of community or engagement with others as necessary for wokeness strongly affirms the informal literature. Temple University students identified wokeness as "being aware of what's

going on around you, but also being able to have conversations about it” (Baddal, 2016, para. 15), a sentiment echoed by participants who felt strongly that the exchange of ideas and education was not just helpful but necessary in developing and maintaining wokeness. This went beyond the expectations participants had of a woke person, and was instead framed as a prerequisite for developing the consciousness to even meet those expectations. Overall, these parallels affirm that the informal literature on wokeness from college students does accurately reflect the experience of wokeness for some students.

Divergence from non-student perspectives. Looking at the larger picture of informal and formal literature around wokeness, not just of that looking at college students, poses both additional parallels and tensions with the participant’s narratives. That being woke is something desirable which should be sought after emerges in both the literature and the participant’s stories. However, as participants all identified as woke for the purposes of this study, it is unclear if this is true reflection of more general college student attitudes. Similarly, the idea of wokeness as dynamic, or existing on scales or levels affirms what appears in the informal literature, though participants addressed nuance in a different way by allowing space for different levels of wokeness in different areas of one’s life (Harriot, 2017).

While these ideas did connect with the participant’s experiences, other important and strong divergences are clear. Wokeness, as participants understood it, while indeed focused on awareness of social ‘issues’, did not rise to the level as expressed by Ashlee, Zamora, and Karikiri (2017). Not only was the language used by participants more moderate and less focused on anything resembling a political

embodiment or identity, but participant narratives also did not much reflect the three major themes identified in that work (Ashlee, Zamora, & Karikiri, 2017). Only the theme of community, as a place for solidarity and safety that is necessary for consciousness raising, resonated with participant narratives. The other themes associated with wokeness by Ashlee, Zamora, and Karikiri (2017), agents of wokeness and wokeness as both liberating and defeating, were hinted at in participant's narratives, but never explicitly identified or nearly as salient.

Additionally, when examining the commentary on wokeness available in the informal literature, participants rarely offered the same level of interrogation or analysis of wokeness as a larger phenomenon in their narratives (Evans, 2017; Harriot, 2017; Hess, 2016; Nunez, 2016).

These differences (both between participants and the larger literature, and literature *by* college students and literature *not by* college students) may indicate that a developmental process exists. Perhaps, the milder associations students have with wokeness when compared with older non-students is simply an early stage in what may become an embodied wokeness and associated thought process more similar to that of Evans (2017) or Ashlee, Zamora, and Karikiri (2017). Through critical consciousness theory, we understand that stages of growth or development are possible (Freire, 1974). This is particularly true in light of the perceived importance of interacting with others as identified by participants, which parallel Freire's (1974) argument that praxis and dialogue are the only tools by which one progresses from one state of critical consciousness to the next. Alternatively, this could be a matter of generation. Some participants identified feeling a sense of woke community with

their generation, either millennials or young people more generally. The affiliation of wokeness and a generation may indicate that rather than a developmental process there is simply a difference of experience or opinion regarding wokeness that exists instead, much like how the literature offers no unified definition.

As noted in Chapter 4, it is also possible, if not likely, that the social identities, particularly racial identities, of the participants may have influenced the findings. We know that historically speaking, wokeness is rooted in Black American legacies of antiracist resistance and consciousness-raising in a way which is tied to community and embodied in identity (Badu, 2012; Beckham, 1972; Kelley, 1962; Pulliam-Moore, 2017). Through intersectionality we know that experiences and relationships with oppression are deeply tied to identity, particularly in how oppression operates different depending on those identities (Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1991; hooks, 1981). These findings could, rather than a development or generational issue, indicate a different experience and understanding of wokeness within and outside of the Black community. It is also curious that wokeness was largely understood by participants in terms that do not necessarily align with the goals of intersectionality, a theory which we know is rooted in Black feminism. The majority of participants in this study did not identify as Black, and the findings which so distinctly depart from the role wokeness has played in Black American culture and history may highlight the ways that non-Black American culture continuously appropriates Black American language and identities, or illuminate real differences in the experiences and understanding of oppression by Black and non-Black people in

America. Perhaps it is a combination of some, or all, of these things. Further suggestions for continued research are discussed later on in this chapter.

Triangulating wokeness in the formal literature. It is also worth examining how the findings relate to the other associated concepts and terminology discussed in the literature review. Surprisingly, neither the concept of allyship or the role of activism was addressed even once directly by participants. Certainly, participants discussed the importance of caring about issues, which do not directly affect your own identities, but the idea of leveraging one's privilege specifically was rarely if at all mentioned. Additionally, while taking action was identified as important to students, that action did not need to be, according to all participants, participating in traditional activism. In fact, only Alex identified that activism was important to them in a partner but did not qualify activism as necessary for wokeness. No other participants even mentioned activism.

The only theme which seems to overlap with either activism or allyship in the literature is the focus on community and the importance of engagement with others, whether as a catalyst to action or a means of maintaining some kind of consciousness. Looking at Bishop's (2002) model of social justice ally development, the wokeness described by participants could be seen to fall into steps (1) understanding oppression and (2) understanding different oppressions. However steps (3) healing the pain associated with consciousness-raising, (4) working towards personal liberation, (5) working towards the liberation of others (allyship), and finally (6) maintaining hope were not extensively discussed by participants, appearing to be largely as beyond the scope of what they consider minimally required for wokeness (Bishop, 2002; Broido

& Reason, 2005). It is possible that based on the current understanding of undergraduate student experiences with wokeness, to be woke, to be an activist, and to be an ally may exist in causal relation to one another, but are not interchangeable or necessarily concordant.

The idea of social justice awareness or interest as described by Miller et al. (2009) and Torres-Harding, Steele, Schulz, Taha, and Pico (2014) actually emerge as perhaps the most aligned with how participants experienced wokeness. Such an awareness or interest refers to becoming aware of social inequities, and by and large an interest in addressing such issues. However, unlike allyship social justice awareness is not dependent on one's identities as oppressed or dominant and leaves space for a variety of enactments and level of commitment, which may or may not include allyship or activism (Miller et al., 2009; Torres-Harding et al., 2014). This again raises the question of a possible causal relationship between allyship, activism, social justice awareness, and wokeness, or the possibility of an associated developmental process.

Implications for Research

This study focused on how college students make sense of wokeness and how they translate the expectations of wokeness to their relationships with their woke communities. As noted in the discussion, both tension and ties with the literature exist, raising several possible questions which could be addressed in future research.

The role of social identity. As noted in previous chapters, the narratives included in this study were limited in represented social identities, particularly regarding racial identity. While outside the scope of this work, considering the nature

of this topic as one deeply related to systems of identity-based oppression and justice it is important that the role of power and identity be further explored regarding wokeness. The history of wokeness as one tied deeply to the Black American experience of anti-racist resistance was not very well reflected in the findings of this study, which may possibly have important implications (Pulliam-Moore, 2016). Additionally, the theme around community as a support network or buffer for marginalized identities reflects that one's awareness of their own oppression could affect their ability to form community and thus develop a relationship with wokeness. Though participants did not believe it was the case, questions of identity regarding oppressor/oppressed status that are important in allyship and critical consciousness should be further explored as playing a role in wokeness for college students (Freire, 1970; Washington & Evans, 1991).

Developmental processes. The formal and informal literature on wokeness reflects that there may be differential understandings and experiences of wokeness for college students than others. Particularly, the work of Ashlee, Zamora, and Karikiri (2017) suggests that greater experience with wokeness could possibly be responsible for the gulf in experience, which currently is reflected between their work and the results of this study. Stage-based developmental models already exist, as discussed in Chapter 2, for related concepts such as allyship (Bishop, 2002; Edwards 2006; Freire, 1974), some elements of which do appear to overlap with participant narratives. Critical consciousness itself suggests a development, or stage-based process, tied closely with community engagement over time (Freire, 1970, 1974). I suggest that future research further explore this possibility, perhaps longitudinally.

Ecosystem: allyship, awareness, activism, and wokeness. As noted in the discussion, the themes reveal a relationship between undergraduate experiences of wokeness, social justice awareness, and tangential elements of allyship and activism. While certainly contentious, allyship has been recognized in the literature as an important pillar in social justice work, particularly within student affairs (Bishop, 2002; Broido, 2000; Broido & Reason, 2005; Edwards, 2006; Patel, 2011; Russell & Bohan, 2016; Washington & Evans, 1991). Bishop's (2002) model of social justice ally development identifies six steps to become an ally, the first two of which overlap with how participants make meaning of and experience wokeness, as discussed in the discussion. This may suggest that wokeness in undergraduate students could be a precursor to allyship behaviors, or co-develop alongside allyship. Similarly, taking action was identified as important to participants, though not necessarily rising to the level of activism. Russel and Bohan (2016) differentiated different kinds of actions or activism as sufficient or not for true allyship, and it stands to reason that based on this wokeness may thusly play a part. Learning outcomes of student activism described by Biddix, Somers, and Polman (2009) actually overlap with many of the expectations participants had of woke individuals, further suggesting a possible relationship among these concepts. A deeper exploration of these ties could be beneficial in developing a more profound understanding of the factors involved in college student involvement in social justice activities.

Implications for Practice

The findings of this study also have implications for student affairs practitioners who seek, as many do, to further social justice awareness and behaviors

among students (Torres-Harding et al., 2014). The following section highlights some of these possible implications.

Encountering difference. The importance of engaging across difference for college students has been well documented in student affairs (Zúñiga, Nagaada, & Sevig, 2002; Keen & Hall, 2009; Laughlin & Kreamer, 2007). That participants identified these experiences as essential for their development of wokeness only serves to corroborate this. It is important, then that we facilitate spaces where such engagement can occur in higher education. As many participants identified, it was not until they came to college, in a new environment with a new community, with a new population, potentially in a new state or country, that they felt they were truly given the opportunity to encounter differences, let alone engage with them. This can be applied at varying levels of the institution – structural or interpersonal. For example, working to build and maintain a diverse student population, across all measures, creates the opportunity for students to encounter difference. However, intentional programming such as intergroup dialogue provides the space for students to intentionally engage that difference in structured environments (Zúñiga, Nagaada, & Sevig, 2002). The further integration of such programs as intergroup dialogue, or similar, into both curricular and cocurricular activities on campus can only serve to promote social justice awareness, perhaps even wokeness, in participants.

Community development. The strong attachment participants described having to their woke communities, and the role they played in their meaning making process and development as a woke person is similarly notable, particularly in light of the concerns of self-protection from participants with marginalized identities. I

therefore suggest that practitioners, especially those in multicultural or identity affinity spaces, work proactively to develop community among students, not only in the interest of developing wokeness but also to provide support for students with marginalized identities or experiencing the pain associated with mismatched expectations. Social support and community engagement has been identified in the literature as an important positive factor in groups with lower retention or persistent rates in higher education, including racial minorities and LGBTQ+ identified students (Museus & Quay, 2009; Snapp, Watson, Russell, Diaz, & Ryan, 2015). Therefore, I suggest that institutions of higher education invest further in developing affinity spaces such as LGBTQ+ centers, as well as affinity student organizations such as an Asian American student union. Practitioners, too, can engage students as members of their community, particularly when sharing similar social identities, or when students lack family support.

Reflection. Finally, participants identified the importance of self-reflection and praxis, particularly concerning positionality. Practitioners can aid in this process by offering intentional space for students to reflect on their own critical consciousness. Reflection models exist across the literature, and I do not intend to suggest one as more important or relevant than another (Grossman, 2008). Indeed, reflection has been identified by scholars in service-learning and study abroad as a critical part of the learning synthesis process for students. It stands that this extends to wokeness as well (Eyler, 2002; Savicki & Price, 2017). Like community-building, but perhaps even more naturally, reflection can be integrated into both the curriculum and co-curriculum. This could take the form of intentional retreats for woke-identifying or

even previously discussed affinity groups, reflective question probing by practitioners such as advisors and mentors, or even simply through the development of an environment which publicly values reflective practice – whether on an office, departmental, or institutional level. Not only could engaging students in reflective practice increase their ability to make meaning of wokeness, but also perhaps lead to further awareness of the mismatched expectations which emerged in the findings, possibly resolving them or making peace with them to reduce that pain. As Jason and Alex identified, focusing on one’s humanity and inability of any one person to be perfect could be key to this process.

Summary of the Study

In this study, I investigated how college students in the United States make sense of wokeness, and how the associated expectations emerge in their relationships to their woke communities. Using a framework of critical consciousness and intersectionality, the findings fill a gap in the literature regarding wokeness, particularly concerning undergraduate students. While concepts such as allyship, activism, social justice awareness, and critical consciousness all enjoy a rich presence in the literature, wokeness has emerged as a result of this study as connected to all in some way, though not sufficiently explained by any. This study is significant in its contribution to the formal literature by identifying salient experiences and associations of wokeness among college students and illuminating areas for further research.

Through the use of thematic analysis and narrative inquiry methodology, I was able to identify five themes relating to the original two research questions. Those

research questions were how do self-identified woke students in the U.S. make sense of wokeness? And how do self-identified woke students in the U.S. perceive the expectations of being woke in relation to their woke peers? The themes which emerged described how participants came to understand wokeness as a series of expectations through an internal process heavily facilitated by engagement with others. Students were willing to engage outside of their woke communities, but only so far, and revealed holding different expectations for themselves and others. I identified implications for further research and student affairs practice. These included the importance of intentional engagement across difference, space for reflection, and community building for students.

Concluding Thoughts

As I reflect on the experience of conducting this study, I cannot help but wonder what it would have meant for my development had the professionals in my life had this work available to them when I was an undergraduate student. As student affairs practitioners, we seek to bring awareness around issues of social justice to our students, often encouraging them to take action or make a difference as a result of that awareness. Rarely do we give enough consideration to the experiences and continued development of those students who we consider to “get it,” or to be our allies or accomplices in consciousness raising. As I reflect on the incident during my time as a practitioner which jumpstarted my interest in this topic, I find my perspective on the dynamics of that group of students shifting in light of my findings. This new knowledge allows me to see that perhaps rather than something uniquely toxic about that community, the reality of mismatched expectations (however extremely they may

have been on display at that time) is a common component of woke-identification. Knowing this, then, I find myself asking: how can I utilize this awareness to identify those differing expectations before they escalate to such a level, or to resolve conflict within woke communities peaceably? The implications for practice detailed previously are a first step, but I lookforward to the insight the further exploration of implications for research can provide.

As my participants helped me better understand, taking the time to reflect and engage with others who feel differently from me can only strengthen my commitment to social justice. The importance of extending compassion to ourselves and students as we make mistakes, fumble, and grow as a result of that reflection is even more critical. As a practitioner, I will be prioritizing this kind of self-forgiveness as well as critical reflection to identify the source of any guilt, or pain I may feel. I will do so not only for my own benefit, but as a way to model doing so for students. These findings and this experience have further ingrained in me my dedication to working with students along the critical consciousness spectrum, understanding that the work done in higher education spaces may prime students for lifelong development. We are not the finish line, only the start.

Appendix A

Key Informant Email

Hello,

My name is Hana Zewdie and I am writing you about my research as a master's student at the University of Maryland. I am seeking student participants in my thesis research study about "woke" college student experiences. The purpose of this study is to better understand these experiences in order to better support students who identify as "woke". This study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and is being conducted under the direction of Dr. Candace M. Moore (cmmoore@umd.edu).

I am reaching out to you because of your role with the [UNIT] at [INSTITUTION]. Would you be willing to share the names or contact information of any college students who you believe may identify, to any extent, as "woke" or with "wokeness"? Participation would consist of a short demographic survey and a 45-minute interview to discuss their experiences. Students must be 18 years or older to participate, but no other demographic limits apply.

I have also attached a flyer to this email that you can share with students directly or distribute across your campus as you see fit. If you are not able to nominate any participants, sharing this flyer would be of great help to me.

To indicate interest in participation, students need only fill out the following brief demographic questionnaire: <http://bit.ly/wokestudy>

If you have any additional questions please contact me via email at hzewdie@umd.edu.

Thank you very much.

Sincerely,
Hana Zewdie (She/Her)
M.A. Student, University of Maryland

Appendix B

Participant Recruitment Email

Hello,

My name is Hana Zewdie. Thank you for indicating interest in participating in this thesis study, the purpose of which is to better understand the experiences of self-identified woke students in order to better support students who identify as woke.

Participation would include a 45-minute to 1-hour interview with me to discuss your experiences as a woke college student. Your information would be kept confidential and be anonymized.



If you would still like to participate, simply sign and return the attached consent form (digital signature is fine). If you have any questions, please contact me via email. Once you have signed the consent form we can go ahead and schedule a time to interview in person. This study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and is being conducted under the direction of Dr. Candace M. Moore (cmmoore@umd.edu).

Thank you very much.

Sincerely,
Hana Zewdie (She/Her)
M.A. Student, University of Maryland

Appendix C

Recruitment Poster



#STAY WOKE?

Seeking woke college students for interviews

Participation in this study consists of one
45-minute interview.

Participants should:

- Identify, to any extent, as woke
- Be a current college student in the DC/MD/VA area
- Be 18+ years old

**To be considered for participation, please
complete a short demographic survey:**

<http://bit.ly/wokestudy>

To find out more contact Hana Zewdie
email: hzewdie@umd.edu

THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY IS TO INCREASE UNDERSTANDING OF
WOKE STUDENT EXPERIENCES IN ORDER TO BETTER SUPPORT THEM

Appendix D

Participant Demographic Questionnaire

The purpose of this questionnaire is to collect demographic information for potential participants in Hana Zewdie's master's thesis research about "woke" college student experiences. I am to recruit participants across a range of social identities (such as race, gender, sexual orientation, etc.), class standing (1st year, 2nd year, etc.), and type of institution you attend (private, public, 2 year, 4 year, HBCU, etc.).

Data collected here will be kept confidential, anonymous, and disassociated from identifying information such as your name or college. Completion of this questionnaire does not guarantee that you will be selected for interview. In the case that you are not selected to participate any information you share here will be deleted.

If you have any questions or concerns please contact Hana Zewdie at hzewdie@umd.edu.

(* indicates questions which require an answer)

1. Name *
2. Email contact information *
3. Do you identify as or consider yourself to be woke (to some degree)? *
4. Do you feel you are a member of a woke community, or that you have a community of woke individuals? *
5. What is your class standing? (i.e. 1st year, 2nd year, 3rd year, and so on)
6. Where are you currently a college student? (please note that to protect your anonymity your institution will not be named in this study and will be given a pseudonym such as "Central Mid-Size College")
7. What is your gender identity?
8. How do you identify regarding sexual orientation?
9. What is your racial and/or ethnic identity? Be as specific as you like.

Appendix E

Participant Consent Form



Initials: _____ Date: _____

Institutional Review Board

1204 Marie Mount Hall • 7814 Regents Drive • College Park, MD 20742 • 301-405-4212 • irb@umd.edu

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE

Project Title	Experiences and Expectations of Wokeness Among College Students
Purpose of the Study	<p>This research is being conducted by Hana Zewdie at the University of Maryland, College Park. The purpose of this small-scale study is to gain an understanding of the meaning of woke as understood by college students who identify as such, and to explore associated intra-group expectations and experiences.</p> <p>I am reaching out to you because you were identified as a current college student who identifies as “woke” at some level. The information that you provide will be part of a research study currently conducted by me at the University of Maryland College Park</p>
Procedures	<p>Participation consists of responding to interview questions which will take approximately 45 minutes. Examples of interview questions include: “Was there a defining moment for you when you knew that you were woke? What was that experience?” and “How do you define woke or wokeness?”</p> <p>You will have the option to allow your interview to be recorded for accuracy. If you choose to decline, only notes will be taken. Participation is voluntary, and you may choose to withdraw from participation at any time. To agree to participate in this study you will be asked to sign this consent form.</p> <p>To consent to have the interview audio recorded, initial below</p>
Potential Risks and Discomforts	<p>Because interview questions will address experiences related to social awareness, activism, and related topics, they may cause some discomfort if you have had negative experiences. While it is anticipated that any such discomfort would be minimal, your participation is voluntary and you can decline to answer any question or end the interview at any time without penalty.</p> <p>To ensure anonymity, including from other participants, you will be asked to choose your own pseudonym, though records of student participants will be kept confidentially for accuracy. Your affiliations, such as college or university or club membership will be</p>

	kept confidential unless you indicate otherwise. All risks and benefits will be explained to participants before participation begins.
Potential Benefits	There are no direct benefits from participating in this research. However, possible benefits include the understanding that you are contributing to improved understanding of and practices regarding “woke” student populations. We hope that, in the future, other people might benefit from this study through improved understanding of “wokeness” in college students.
Confidentiality	<p>Your identity will remain confidential to protect your privacy. You will be asked to create a pseudonym to be used in any written report. The key by which participant identities are stored will be kept in a separate, secure, document on the Principal Investigator’s computer, independent from interview data.</p> <p>All data relating to this interview will be kept either on the Principal Investigator’s computer, or password-protected data storage through Dropbox. Any hard copies will be kept in the Principal Investigator’s office files under lock. Only the Principal Investigator will have access to data collected from your interview. When data is no longer needed, it will be destroyed (i.e., shredded or erased), but not before a minimum of five years after collection.</p> <p>If we write a report or article about this research project, your identity will be protected to the maximum extent possible. Your information may be shared with representatives of the University of Maryland, College Park or governmental authorities if you or someone else is in danger or if we are required to do so by law.</p>
Right to Withdraw and Questions	<p>Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part at all. If you decide to participate in this research, you may stop participating at any time. If you decide not to participate in this study or if you stop participating at any time, you will not be penalized or lose any benefits to which you otherwise qualify. If you are a student or employee, your employment status or academic standing will not be affected by your participation or non-participation.</p> <p>If you decide to stop taking part in the study, if you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or if you need to report an injury related to the research, please contact the investigator:</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Hana Zewdie 1117 Hornbake Library University of Maryland College Park, MD, 20740</p>

Initials: _____ Date: _____

	<p style="text-align: center;">hzewdie@umd.edu 971-275-3070</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Thesis Chair Candace M. Moore, Ph.D. 3942 Campus Drive CHSE Department, Benjamin Building 3234A Office College Park, MD 20742</p>	
Participant Rights	<p>If you have questions about your rights as a research participant or wish to report a research-related injury, please contact:</p> <p style="text-align: center;">University of Maryland College Park Institutional Review Board Office 1204 Marie Mount Hall College Park, Maryland, 20742 E-mail: irb@umd.edu Telephone: 301-405-0678</p> <p>This research has been reviewed according to the University of Maryland, College Park IRB procedures for research involving human subjects.</p>	
Statement of Consent	<p>Your signature indicates that you are at least 18 years of age; you have read this consent form or have had it read to you; your questions have been answered to your satisfaction and you voluntarily agree to participate in this research study. You will receive a copy of this signed consent form.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">If you agree to participate, please sign your name below.</p>	
Signature and Date	NAME OF PARTICIPANT	
	[Please Print]	
Statement of Consent	SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT	
Signature and Date	DATE	

Appendix F

Interview Protocol

RQ#1: How do self-identified woke students in the US make sense of wokeness?

RQ#2: How do self-identified woke students in the US perceive the expectations of being woke in relation to their woke peers?

Sub questions indicate potential follow-up questions, dependent on participant response.

1. Tell me about how you identify with wokeness/what your relationship with woke is?
 - a. Have you always been woke?
 - i. Yes: Why do you think that is?
 - ii. No: How did you become woke?
 - b. Was there a defining moment for you when you knew that you were woke? What was that experience?
 - i. What positive or enriching experiences have you had as a result of being woke? What do you think contributed to that?
 - ii. When do you feel like you are most woke?
2. How do you define woke or wokeness?
 - a. (is it distinct from other words?)
 - b. Do you think identities play a role in that? For example, someone's race, gender, or sexual orientation.
 - c. Where did you develop this definition from? How did you come to believe this?
3. Tell me about a role model, mentor, or figure in your life you feel like you can look up to regarding being woke.
 - a. What is it about them that makes you look up to them?
 - b. Can you tell me about a memorable experience you have with that person?
 - c. Alternatively, can you tell me about someone who may have disgusted or disappointed you in their wokeness?
 - i. What was it that made you see them differently?
4. Was there a defining moment for you when you knew that you were woke? What was that experience?
 - a. What positive or enriching experiences have you had as a result of being woke? What do you think contributed to that?
 - b. When do you feel like you are most woke?
5. Think about the people you spend the most time with – friends, family, classmates, whoever they may be. When you spend time with these people, do

- you talk about your wokeness?
- a. If so, what does the group talk about?
If not, why do you think that is?
 - b. How would you describe their relationship with wokeness?
6. You shared on the original questionnaire that you feel you are part of a community of wokeness, or of woke people. Can you tell me about that community?
- a. What role do these folks play in your life?
 - b. When you spend time with these people, do you talk about your wokeness?
 - c. If you can imagine a scenario, or perhaps this has actually happened, where someone wanted to join or participate in this community but is not someone that you would describe as woke (though perhaps they think they are). What do you think the reaction from your community would be?
 - i. What would your reaction be?
7. Have you ever felt judged by others around your level of wokeness? If so, can you tell me about what that interaction or experience was?
- a. If not, can you think of any times you may have witnessed or heard of it happening? Maybe even been someone who did the judging?
 - b. Have you ever felt like there are areas in your life that you feel like you're not woke enough in?
 - i. How did you come to realize that? What does it feel like to recognize that?
 - ii. ***If discussion of pressure, being overwhelmed, or not feeling like enough: How do you manage those feelings, which sound quite intense?
8. As you reflect on your experience as a woke person, what would you want your woke self of today to tell your woke self of yesterday?
- a. Would you have any advice for other students who are trying to become woke?
 - b. Based on what we've talked about, is there anything you want to make sure you share that you haven't already?

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