To be White, Lesbian, and Academic: Reflections on Developing and Intersecting Identities

Lori Messinger, Ph.D., University of Kansas

The following narrative describes the events that led the author to her professional career. She believes that her professional academic career and her successes as a scholar and educator can be attributed to her integrated identities as a white person, a lesbian, and an academic.

"A woman who is willing to be herself and pursue her own potential runs not so much the risk of loneliness, as the challenge of exposure to more interesting men—and people in general."
—*Lorraine Hansberry[1]*

I have taught identity development theories many times in human-behavior courses. While I am very clear about the limitations of any theory, especially stage-based theories, white identity and lesbian identity development theories offer insights into my own development as a scholar. Two stage theories in particular—Helms' theory on white racial identity development (1984, 1990) and Cass' theory of lesbian identity development (1979)—along with the theory of racial scripting, are the best at explaining my path. I will use this essay to reflect on the many ways that my identities shaped my growth and development as an academic, how they grew separately and merged together, and how the integration of these identities serves me now as a more senior scholar.

Becoming White

Helms (1984, 1990) offered a well-known theory of white racial identity development, outlining six stages of progression from initial recognition of difference and racism to a positive, nonracist white identity: contact, disintegration, reintegration, pseudo-independence, immersion/emersion, and autonomy. My first contact with racial difference did not occur until I was six years old. I spent the first five years of my life in Springfield, Pennsylvania, a predominantly white suburb of Philadelphia. The only diversity I recognized was that some people spoke different languages (i.e., Spanish), like my friend Michael, and that some people had different religions (our immediate family was Jewish, but my mother's extended family were Baptist because my mother converted to Judaism before marriage). My racial environs changed, however, when we moved into a new neighborhood when I was six years old.

Our new neighborhood—Willingboro, New Jersey—was just an hour away from where I had been living, but it was a world away in terms of racial and ethnic diversity. This community was one of the original Levittowns, suburban developments established by William Levitt. When we moved into our home on Eden Rock Lane in the summer of 1975, the community had been intentionally, if somewhat reluctantly, integrated (Pooley, 2008). We had Black neighbors to the left of us, behind us, and directly across the street. There were interracial couples and Latino, Filipino, and Japanese children in my neighborhood. Days after I moved in, I befriended several white girls on the street and another black girl my age who lived next door. None of the white girls were friends with my neighbor. While I recognized difference in our skin colors, I did not attribute meaning to that difference until several weeks later when my friend invited me to meet her at the local pool. I arrived at

the pool to find a group of black children playing. I could not identify my friend among the group; as I would sheepishly admit to her later, I could not tell one young black face from another. It pains and embarrasses me to write it now; after years of living in Willingboro and elsewhere, I can hardly imagine not seeing differences and identifying characteristics in people of different races than my own. I take a small solace in the fact that I was six years old. I know that at the time, my lack of experience with racial difference marked me with ignorance and confusion.

When I walked into the pool area and saw the group of black children, I felt uncomfortable: some due to my status as a newcomer, but more due to feeling different from the other black children. It was the first time I realized and recognized myself as "Other," as a white girl who was both racially and culturally different from my peers. I had no racial script (Williams, 2007) about African Americans at that time, and so I would begin to develop one as a young child based on my own peer interactions, my cultural environment, and my familial culture. My parents offered positive liberal injunctions about race when we were small, saying that "people are all the same" and noting that we should treat our black neighbors as equals. That said, my parents had no black friends, and their perspectives were rooted in idealism, not experience.

I took those messages from my parents, along with my developing identity as a white person with diverse peers, and created scripts to negotiate difference. The racial scripts I developed operated in my interactions with peers, teachers, and other adults. My first principal was an African American man, whom I greatly admired, and our neighbor across the street was also a leader in the public schools; I took away the message that Black people could be important and could be leaders. We had a Black History Month celebration every year at my school, reinforcing the centrality of black accomplishments and culture.

There were other scripts that were imprinting themselves on me, though I had no formal understanding of them until later in life. Our schools had economic and race-based busing and educational tracking. Students were bused into my school from a lower income, predominantly black neighborhood. While my classes were racially integrated, we segregated into different reading levels; the "gifted program" of which I was part was limited to white students, while the students of color made up the majority of the lower groups. These two processes reinforced stereotypical ideas that black people were likely to be poor and intellectually challenged. The conflicting ideas of black adults as middle-income, capable leaders, and black youth as low-income, incapable learners, somehow co-existed for me in tension with one another.

As I aged into junior high and high school, I learned that my parents' liberal injunctions (i.e., "Black people were just like us") were not enough to help me negotiate my diverse community. I had black , Filipino, Latino, white, and multiracial friends. The more time I spent with people of other racial and ethnic groups, the whiter I felt. I learned more about cultural beliefs and practices of different groups, how they thought about white people and white culture, and contrasted them with my own. I started to "flip the script," you could say, rejecting my parents' liberal assumptions and learning new understandings of how white people can and should interact in a multicultural world.

It was easier to reject my parents' perspectives and move into Helms' (1990) stage of "pseudo-integration" when I became a teenager and started to date. My parents' liberal platitudes broke down in 1980 when, in eighth grade I began to date a biracial (black - white) male peer. My parents reacted with their own racial scripts, born of fear and racism, and forbade me to date anyone who wasn't white. They talked about moving into a less diverse, whiter community. These scripts did not make sense to me, though, as many of my peers were dating interracially. Instead, I recognized the racism in my parents' responses, and I consciously rejected it. In my own teenaged idealism, I decided to try to make them live their professed ideals and persisted with dating interracially, even bringing my boyfriends home for dinner.

At the same time that I was warring with my parents:

...local real estate agents (seven of whom were eventually sent to jail) "helped" many in-migrating African-Americans purchase homes with mortgages—insured by the Federal Housing Administration—that were larger than they could afford. When owners defaulted on their loans, as many of them did, banks were protected against the loss and received repayment from the government. While the agents moved on to the next victims (and the next commission), the foreclosed homes typically stood vacant and boarded up, destabilizing the surrounding neighborhood. This further encouraged the outflow of white residents—between 1980 and 1990, Willingboro lost 9,000 white residents, or nearly 40 percent of its white population—and caused property values to plummet. (quote by Brooks, cited in Pooley, 2008)

When I joined the traveling choir in sophomore year (1982-1983) in high school, I was the only white person in the twenty-person group. Our town became increasingly African American.

As the demographics of the town changed, I became more aware of the racist perceptions of residents of nearby communities. White people I met through my temple or regional activities disparaged my community for its poverty and racial diversity, asking me if I was afraid to live there. In one memorable incident, white cheerleaders from another high school refused to use our locker rooms for fear they would be attacked. I was clear that the comments and behaviors were a reflection of stereotypes about black people as dangerous, and I was angry in response. As a member of the community, I took these comments personally, believing that they reflected on me as much as on my black peers. It made me contemptuous of some of the more blatant forms of anti-black racism.

I don't mean to imply that there was not interpersonal and institutional racism in Willingboro, or that I did not harbor any racist beliefs. Racism certainly existed in my beliefs

and in the larger community. Racism was something that I discussed with my friends, something we talked about in classes and personal conversations. It was something to be navigated, negotiated, and addressed. With all of the diversity among our teachers, friends, peers, and families, we could not help but discuss it.

The positive outcome of these youthful cross-racial and cross-cultural experiences is that I developed new ways of connecting with many different groups of color. As Williams (2007) notes, research has shown that early and consistent positive experiences with people who are not white leads white people to become more comfortable and less racist in their interactions with different people. This finding was true for me, especially as I related to African Americans. My interest in and comfort with African American history, cultures, and communities inspired me to move into Helms' (1990) "immersion stage," taking a number of black history and literature courses, cultural diversity courses, and critical theory courses in college. I learned so much about African American history and culture that it feels like a part of my own culture, my own American story. At the same time, I am usually aware of my own racial identity as a white person, and I endeavor to be attentive to my own racism and the racism around me. I would remain in this stage, and the focus would shift for me to identity issues of sexual orientation as I moved on in undergraduate and graduate academic programs.

Becoming Lesbian

I had fairly well integrated my identity as a white person when I began to suspect that I was a lesbian. My lesbian identity development closely followed the six discrete stages of Cass' theory: (1) identity confusion; (2) identity comparison; (3) identity tolerance; (4) identity acceptance; (5) identity pride; and (6) identity synthesis (1979).

As an undergraduate student in the late 1980s, I entered a stage of identity confusion. I continued to date men as I had in high school, but I just didn't seem to be as interested in them as were my heterosexual female friends. I began considering that I might be a lesbian,

but I could not really accept that as a reality. An undergraduate philosophy major, I lived mainly in my head, both personally and academically, and therefore was drawn to the esoteric nature of political philosophy. As my undergraduate career progressed, I became increasingly unhappy, both personally and academically. Eventually, I dropped out of school and took on a job at a rape crisis center, working alongside social workers and feminist activists. After a semester, I returned to school and continued to date men and pursue my philosophy degree.

In my last year in school, I decided to apply to graduate school in political science, as it seemed sufficiently theoretical and yet had a more practical and applied focus. I found a program, with a concentration in women and politics, which allowed me to include my interests in women's issues. This disciplinary change was accompanied by further development in my sexual identity as I made new friends in the graduate program who were openly lesbian. They helped me understand and become comfortable with my sexual orientation. I moved quickly through that stage of identity comparison (comparing myself with my lesbian peers and reading from their lesbian literary collections) to trying on the identity of lesbian myself (identity tolerance). I remember being shocked as new choices, once foreclosed by heterosexual norms, opened a new world for me. It was a time of great uncertainty and greater excitement.

By then an ardent feminist and critical theorist, I came to embrace my identity as a lesbian by recognizing it as both a personal (emotional, sexual) and political (social, cultural) identity. As I began to develop what Cass (1979) calls "identity acceptance," I dated women and started to think intellectually about the intersections of issues of racism, sexism, classism, and heterosexism and homophobia.

After a few short romances, I began my first serious lesbian relationship with a social worker (now my partner) who would introduce me to the field of social work. I had become dissatisfied with the field of political science as still too esoteric and removed from the lives and needs of oppressed people and the issues of the African American community in which I was raised, and social work seemed to offer something different. Hearing about my partner's work in a homeless shelter and reading her copies of *Social Work*, I found myself drawn to the academic professional discipline of social work, with its recognition of oppression and discrimination and its commitment to social change and social justice. Rather than simply theorizing about these issues as political science had done, social work offered the knowledge, skills, and values to turn theory into praxis. I found a way to connect my experiences working at the sexual assault services program with my academic interests. I quickly decided to take the terminal

Master's Degree in political science and pursue graduate study in social work.

During this time in my relationship, I also became much clearer about myself as a lesbian. I believed that my relationship would be long lasting, and with it my identity solidified. I also became more politically aware, moving from the Northeast, which had always been my home, to the South to live with my partner. As a lesbian Jew from New Jersey, the religious and sexual politics of North Carolina were a shock. All of my identities seemed contested in this atmosphere, and rejections and prejudices based on my sexual orientation were emotionally upsetting to me. I responded to this challenge by becoming more politically focused on myself as a lesbian.

I pursued the MSW and Ph.D. simultaneously, then, with my lesbian identity at the forefront of my sense of self. I was deep in the both socially annoying and personally empowering "identity pride" stage

of lesbian identity development (Cass, 1979). My pride was visible in my lesbian jewelry and t-shirts adorned with pro-gay messages. All of my courses and experiences were filtered through this identity lens. I am certain that, if asked, my instructors would confirm that my identity as a lesbian was as ever-present to them as it was to me. Yet, as a white, middle-class, able-bodied woman who had lived with heterosexual privilege for a majority of my life, I brought a sense of entitlement and an expectation of acceptance that differentiated me from many of my LGBT friends and peers. I was often surprised and hurt by heterosexism and homophobia when they occurred.

I was learning to negotiate my lesbian identity and issues of disclosure while I was in the MSW/Ph.D. programs, just as I was learning what it meant to be a professional social worker. The intersections of these learning processes caused a conflict for me when I was in my first MSW field placement, a conflict that would mark my professional life.

I have discussed this experience before—in a more impersonal fashion—in an article co-written with a bisexual MSW student about our experiences in our field placements. In that article, I write in an academic style about what was a cognitively confusing and emotionally upsetting experience in field placement. I had a summer block placement in a parenting and pregnancy-prevention program for low-income teens, a program housed in a large county social services department in a Southern state. Again, due to my stage of identity development, I had not yet completely integrated my lesbian identity into my personal or professional identity. I decided to disclose my sexual orientation to my field instructor, my immediate supervisor, and my co-workers, but not to my teenage, black, female clients. I was afraid that they wouldn't like me if they knew, and that disclosure might ruin my chance of building rapport with them. I also rationalized that the issues in this abbreviated placement would be related to race, class, and (hetero-)sexuality. I assumed that, as young black women and mothers, these clients were all heterosexual. I was wrong.

I was assigned to work with one young mother, an emancipated minor, whom I will call Krista. Krista had had a long history of involvement with a large range of social services: child protection and foster care services related to her mother who struggled with addiction; job readiness training; income support programs; healthcare and mental health programs; and financial support and childcare benefits for her own child. Her case file was approximately four inches thick. I initially found Krista as untrusting as she was strong willed, consistently challenging me to prove my competence and commitment. She still remains one of the best self-advocates I have ever met. I provided case management and transportation and advocated on her behalf with several service providers.

Somewhere in that time together, Krista began asking me questions about my personal life. Specifically, she wanted to know about my romantic life. While all of the young women in the program liked to talk about boys, and often asked the interns about dating and sex, Krista asked with a persistence and bluntness that made me uncomfortable. I found myself anxiously dodging her questions. Was I married? (No.) Did I have a boyfriend? (Not right now.) Why not? (Too busy with school.) When did I last have a boyfriend? (I don't know. Why does it matter?) What do I look for in a man? Do I like boys? Etc.

Around the same time as the questions became more pointed, I found an entry in her extensive file—just one entry—that raised a question about Krista's sexual orientation. A human services worker had noted, "Krista could be a lesbian?" When I read the entry, it suddenly came together for me. Unlike all of the other women in the program, Krista never had a boyfriend or talked much about boys. Krista wanted to know about my sexual orientation so she could reveal her own. But, as a budding social worker and fairly newly identified lesbian, I was unsure whether I should disclose my sexual orientation to her.

I sought guidance from my supervisor, who sent me to speak to her boss, who was my field instructor. My instructor, a seasoned professional who was close to retirement age and a conservative Southern woman, seemed

completely uncomfortable with my question. She asked that I not disclose until she had asked the director of the social service agency for direction. They stalled and refused to give me an answer. Sensing that no direction was forthcoming from my instructor, I reached out to my faculty liaison. She seemed unsure of how to advise me and suggested that I seek out the professional literature related to sexual orientation and disclosure in practice settings. I investigated the literature, but there was very little available to assist me in my decision.

I recall a painful moment when, during a field trip with the youth, we stopped at a fast-food restaurant for dinner. Several of the employees at the restaurant were obviously gay and lesbian, a fact that did not escape the youth or many of the other patrons. Several young male patrons started imitating and mocking the employees in an effort to gain the attention of the young women clients, adopting a stereotypical gay lisp and prancing around the restaurant. Most of the youth thought this was hilarious, and homophobic comments were flying fast and furious. I glanced at Krista, who sat stone faced. I had a moment of panic, afraid to intervene because it might make the youth question my sexual orientation, but I wanted to protect Krista's feelings. I tried to catch the eye of my supervisor and the other intern, but they would not meet my gaze or intervene. Finally, I motioned to Krista and told the others that we were going to leave, implying that I was through eating and we were impatient and ready to go.

I reached the end of the summer without any direction from my field instructor or her boss, and I again approached my faculty liaison. I told her that Krista continued to push me for information, and I was more and more certain that Krista herself was a lesbian. I thought that it made sense to disclose to her, as I could serve as a role model for the young woman. My liaison supported my decision, and, in the face of my concern that my instructor might be angry, she reminded me that she (and not the field instructor) was the person who would assign my grade.

So, on my last day in placement, I took Krista out for lunch and came out to her. She smiled broadly and said, "I knew it!" She then asked if she could introduce me to her girlfriend, whom she had been dating for almost a year. I took her home and met her girlfriend, I told them about my partner, and we discussed what it meant to be a lesbian. In the course of our conversation, Krista made many homophobic comments about other lesbians and said self-loathing statements related to her own sexual orientation, which I tried to gently challenge and counter with more affirming perspectives. When I left her that day, I was pleased that I had disclosed to her—I could see her pleasure and relief in knowing that I was lesbian. Yet, I also felt sorely disappointed in myself for waiting so long to disclose. I was angry at my field instructor and faculty liaison for not providing better support and guidance. I could have been serving as a mentor and support for her around these issues; instead, I modeled shame and fear. I had missed an opportunity.

When I returned for the fall semester, I talked to a bisexual student who had been placed in a rural mental health setting over the summer. She had had a similar experience, where she struggled with whether to disclose to her gay, teenaged, male client. She had been forbidden to disclose by her field instructor, who feared issues of transference (supposedly) and anger and blame by the teen's parents (more likely). We discussed our frustration, and, on the advice of my former faculty liaison, wrote an essay for our school newsletter about our experiences. Though critical of the social work program, the essay was well received, and several faculty members suggested that we expand the essay into an article and submit it for publication. Since neither of us could find much in the professional literature, we were excited by the idea of publishing the essay and worked quickly to get it into article form. We were very pleased when *Affilia: The Journal of Women and Social Work* agreed to publish it.

Intersecting Identities

After the article had been published and I was deciding on my dissertation topic in the mid-1990s, I considered doing a study of lesbian and gay students' experiences in field

placement. After all, there was a clear gap in the literature in this area. I talked to several faculty members about the idea, and each of them dissuaded me from pursuing that line of research. Most argued that I would not be able to get a job if I did a study on LGBT issues, especially as they related to social work education; instead, they suggested I pursue a more traditional project on some area of mainstream social work practice (child welfare, poverty, healthcare, etc.). As a "feminist" researcher with "little practice experience" who preferred "qualitative" inquiry, they argued, I had enough strikes against me without presenting myself to the

discipline as a lesbian interested only in LGBT topics (a phenomenon pejoratively referred to by some as "me-search").

Looking back, I think that most of these faculty members had my best interests at heart. Their concerns were well-placed; LGBT academics and LGBT research have routinely been marginalized in social work academia. (For example, I have been attending major national social work conferences for approximately 15 years, and it never fails that the LGBT series session winds up on the very last day of the conferences!) Further, although we recognize that social work education is the process by which we prepare future social workers, many social work scholars consider education-related research to be lightweight and secondary to more "substantial" research on social problems and interventions. But I took away a sense that, deep down, my mentors believed these perspectives themselves, and that was hard to swallow. I made my peace with the idea of a more mainstream dissertation project, but I resolved that one day I would do the LG field experience study.

Instead, I returned to the topic of race for my dissertation research. I had been working as a research assistant on an evaluation of four anti-poverty projects in North Carolina, one of which was located in Warren County—a rural, predominantly African American community. Like my hometown Willingboro, Warren County was disparaged by many in North Carolina, and the county ranked at the bottom in indicators of wealth, health, and education. The project leader was an African American woman who had hired a predominantly black staff to support and serve the local residents. Few of the white residents would become involved with the anti-poverty project; poor whites would not use its services; and more affluent whites would not support the project. In trying to understand this racial divide and its impact on the agency's development and effectiveness, I conducted a qualitative study of the project's planning and its relationship to the local history and culture.

My experiences growing up with African Americans, many of whom had grown up in the South, helped me connect with some of the southern black participants, especially the black women who were active in the anti-poverty program. I had some difficulty building a rapport with some of the Southern white participants, especially those who voiced openly racist views. My heightened awareness of white racism and attitudes of white superiority helped shape my analysis of the local white dominant culture and the historical and current divisions between the two races.

Even as I worked on this racial topic, issues related to my lesbian identity did not recede. I began teaching during my doctoral program both at a nearby BSW program and with MSW students on my own campus. My lesbian identity emerged as an issue on the first day of my first course when I was deciding what to wear. That first class began in mid-August when it was still incredibly hot outside. I was concerned that if I wore shorts or a skirt, the students would be preoccupied with my decidedly lesbian unshaven legs. I chose to wear pants and a blouse for the morning course and resolved that I would change into shorts and a t-shirt to work in my office later. It also seemed more "professional" to dress

up as the instructor. Everything went well until I emerged from my office in my shorts and walked right into my students returning from lunch. They looked me up and down, taking in my unshaven legs, and one student asked, "Why did you dress up for class? Were you stylin' just for us?" I admitted that I was, and another student laughed and said, "Ah, don't bother." I took them at their word, but I remained nervous and guarded about my unshaven legs and underarms, afraid that they might cause students not to like me.

As I continued to teach over the next few years, I struggled with how to negotiate disclosure of my sexual orientation to my social work students. I tried out different approaches: sometimes I mentioned it on the first day, as one of my many identities (Jewish, lesbian, Northerner, doctoral student); other times I waited and mentioned my identity as it related to the topic of discussion ("As a lesbian, I have had that experience."); other times, I never said the word lesbian but instead referred to my partner or used her or our relationship as an example. Sometimes I looked directly at the students when I came out, and other times I would turn away or studiously gaze over their heads. Regardless of the method or the delivery, each time I disclosed in those early years, it felt jarring, like an errant note in an otherwise lovely melody. I would break into a sweat, and I would feel as if my voice were suddenly louder and more strident. After the disclosure, class usually proceeded as if nothing had happened, but I knew that my orientation was now a confirmed part of how they saw me. This realization was reflected in student evaluations; several students over the course of my doctoral teaching experiences would write critically about my "agenda" and decry my "over-inclusion" of LGBT issues in the classroom.

Despite the anxiety-producing nature of in-class disclosure, I have always chosen to disclose my sexual orientation to my students. Why? Perhaps because I am an extrovert, an external processor who cannot imagine *not* talking about myself (which could explain this article, as well, I suppose). I frequently use examples from my own life, and I wouldn't want to censor myself in selecting examples.

I am also political, not to mention somewhat oppositional, and I strongly believe that I have the *right* to disclose my sexual orientation. But I also feel a responsibility as an educator to disclose my orientation as a means to help heterosexual students gain insights into LGBT issues while providing support and an openly gay presence for LGBT students. My field experience with Krista let me know the costs of not speaking out. Also, as a student who attended four schools and pursued four different degrees and yet never had an openly gay or lesbian instructor, I know well a student's desire for an LGBT mentor, for support, and for a role model.

My sexual orientation again became an issue when I went on the job market. Given the *Affilia* article, I knew that potential employers would know that I am a lesbian. I also was used to being out in my everyday life, and I could not imagine taking a position anywhere that would not be comfortable with me. That said, several faculty mentors cautioned me about being "too out" in cover letters and interviews. Better to let them get to know you first as a person and a scholar, they implied. One mentor even discussed my clothing and appearance with me, acknowledging that he knew I could dress appropriately (in a way that didn't mark me as lesbian) when the occasion demanded it. Again, I was slightly hurt by the homophobic nature of these comments although I knew they were intended to help me prepare for the job search. I just wish that my advisors had acknowledged that the homophobia and heterosexism they were trying to get me to accommodate was *wrong*.

Living as a White Lesbian Academic

I have generally found academe, and social work as an academic discipline, to be accepting of me as a lesbian. Honestly, it has sometimes been more difficult to be accepted as a feminist and a qualitative researcher! I have been able to pursue and obtain internal and external funding for research on LGBT issues; in fact, my first research project after the dissertation was the study of LGBT students' experiences in field placement, funded with competitive intramural grant funds.

My findings from that study have been accepted in respected social work journals, and I was able to co-author two edited books on social work with LGBT populations with a highly regarded university press. I received tenure based on my body of LGBT-related research and writing, and I am currently serving in an administrative position at a ranked research-intensive university. All of these successes have been a result of my openness about my sexual orientation, my continuing interest in LGBT issues and concerns, and my ability to integrate my personal and professional lives.

There have been difficult moments: I was denied a position at a religious school because of my sexual orientation, my openness about it, and my public (read: published) support for social justice for LGBT people. I was informed by one program director that I likely would not be tenured at my university for LGBT-related research, and several colleagues have suggested that I move beyond the "narrow focus" of LGBT communities even though everyone says that it is important to create a defined research trajectory. (As an aside, I find it interesting that no one thinks that other slices of the general population, such as children with autism, are too narrow a population for a research agenda although there likely are more LGBT people in the United States than American children who have been diagnosed with autism.) It is challenging to find funding for LGBT-related research if you are not focused on healthcare or AIDS research, and so external funding has always been in short supply. I have also run into problems getting research projects on LGBT populations approved by Institutional Review Boards, which tend to misunderstand LGBT issues and culture and to be overprotective about LGBT populations.

The overt challenges of being an anti-racist white woman are even fewer in social work. There is a stated commitment by social work as a profession, and by our professional academic organizations, to address and eliminate racial and ethnic discrimination. We don't always live up to this commitment, but few scholars will openly discriminate against a white woman trying to pursue social and economic justice. I continue to use my experiences negotiating racially and culturally diverse interactions as a white person in my teaching, scholarship, and service. As a baccalaureate program director, I have had the great privilege of meeting and learning from African American scholars and other women of color. I try to live every day as a purposively anti-racist white woman, working to interact respectfully and responsively in a culturally diverse, racist culture that privileges whites. I do not always succeed, and my interracial relationships can be strained with the weight of racial stresses.

As an out, white lesbian, I have found support in a variety of places. Established LGBT academics like Joan Laird, Jean Quam, Jeanne Anastas, Cathryne Schmitz, and Mary Swigonski have served as role models for me, along with up-and-coming leaders like Darlyne Bailey, David Jenkins, Karen Fredriksen-Goldsen, and Deena Morrow. Groups like EFLAG (the group in the Association of Baccalaureate Program Directors (BPD) for LGBT issues), the Committee on Sexual Orientation and Gender Expression (the group in the Council on Social Work Education), and the LGBT Caucus have helped provide me with a community of LGBT scholars, many of whom are committed to anti-racism as well. LGBT peers have provided a good deal of support and guidance for me; they showed me what was possible for LGBT academics, and many have become trusted colleagues, scholarly collaborators, and friends. My heterosexual colleagues, especially women of color and other intentional white and male allies have been especially helpful even as they remind me of the need to be collectively committed to eradicating all oppressions.

I believe that I have now achieved what Cass (1979) called "identity synthesis" across my integrated identities. Rather than being defined only by my sexual orientation, as I was during my "pride" stage, my lesbianism is an integral part of who I am as a scholar, a teacher, a white woman, and a person. When I gained media attention as an advocate for a local domestic partner registry, I never once worried about support from my Dean or my colleagues. I approach disclosure to new students as an

everyday occurrence; the disclosure, while still a little louder note than the rest of the melody, is no longer jarring or scary to me. That is not to say that disclosure is always easy, but by now, most people in my university and in social work education know that I am a lesbian—or they will when they see my curriculum vitae, so I don't have to wait for that shoe to drop.

My identity as a white anti-racist is, in many ways, more challenging to maintain. I work at a school that is predominantly white— we have very few faculty and students of color. It is easy to forget my whiteness in a culture that normalizes and erases it, and claiming myself as white and anti-racist can be jarring in this culture. Nonetheless, I have worked to establish support programs for students of color, students with high financial need, and first-generation college students like myself. I have worked with our staff to develop recruitment strategies that open the doors of college to those individuals who have been shut out from higher education due to work schedules, life circumstances, and a lack of experience with higher education systems. I try to maintain my relationships with colleagues and friends of color and seek out cultural and educational opportunities to spend time as a white minority.

I am glad that I have focused much of my scholarship in the areas of LGBT and diversity issues. My knowledge of LGBT communities, histories, and policies has developed significantly, and my passion for this area has not waned. I write about intersecting oppressions, specifically those affecting African Americans and other people of color. The ability to focus on my areas of interest, and to develop specialized knowledge, has allowed me to be more productive than I might have been had I followed a more traditional path. It has not been an easy journey, but I believe that by accepting and integrating my identities, I have been able to make scholarly and administrative contributions that I hope can improve the experiences of LGBT people and people of color and those whose identities intersect.

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Lori Messinger, Ph.D., is a professor at the University of Kansas School of Social Welfare. Comments regarding this article can be sent to: lorim@ku.edu

(Footnotes)
[1] The title of this article is also an homage to a work by Lorraine Hansberry, a collection of her writings entitled To be young, gifted, and Black (1970). Hansberry, best known as the playwright who authored A Raisin in the Sun, was a Black lesbian. She wrote many works on the intersections of identities, oppression, and liberation. Her work, along with work by LGB African Americans James Baldwin and Audre Lorde, has provided support for me in my own thinking and in my personal identity development.