Early Career Women of Color as Social Justice Change Leaders

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EARLY CAREER WOMEN OF COLOR AS SOCIAL JUSTICE CHANGE LEADERS

A Thesis
Presented to the Faculty of the School of Education of the University of San Francisco

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
MASTER OF ARTS
in
Organization and Leadership

By
Amy Anh Hoàng Đinh

Spring 2024
This thesis, written by
Amy Anh Hoàng Đinh
University of San Francisco
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under the guidance of the project committee,
and approved by all its members,
has been accepted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

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In

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TABLE OF CONTENTS</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENT</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement of the Problem</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background and Need for This Study</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose of the Study</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations of the Study</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significance of the Study</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definition of Terms</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER II. LITERATURE REVIEW</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical Framework</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power Dynamics in Higher Education</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Career Professional Work Experience</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational Change Processes &amp; Strategies in Higher Education</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary of Literature Review</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER III. METHODOLOGY</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restatement of Purpose</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Design</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population and Sample</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instrumentation</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human Subjects Approval</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Collection</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Analysis</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researcher's Background</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER IV. RESULTS</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overview of Findings</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization/Institution</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Justice</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary of Findings</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER V. DISCUSSION, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSION</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction .................................................................................................................. 72
Discussion ................................................................................................................... 72
Recommendations ...................................................................................................... 85
Conclusion ................................................................................................................ 87
REFERENCES .............................................................................................................. 89
APPENDICES ............................................................................................................. 92
Appendix A. Pre-Interview Survey Text ................................................................. 92
Appendix B. Semi-Structured Interview Protocol ............................................... 94
Appendix C. Consent Form ..................................................................................... 96
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ABSTRACT

The student affairs profession is predominantly female, but women, especially women of color (WOC), are disproportionately in entry-level positions. The majority of student affairs professionals also believe social justice is important but desire more support for their social justice work. This study examined how early career WOC perceived the power dynamics that they encountered in their social justice-oriented organizational change efforts, the strategies and tactics they utilized to lead change efforts, and the aspects of their identities that were the most salient to them during their change efforts. The study design used a phenomenology methodology and an intersectionality theoretical framework. Data was collected from six study participants, using a pre-interview survey and a semi-structured interview protocol. The key findings from the coded and analyzed data were grouped in the following conceptual categories: identity, relationships, organization/institution, and social justice. The concepts of identity and relationships were especially intertwined, but awareness of identity was also a recurring theme when interviewees spoke about organization/institution and social justice.

The data indicate that the difficulties experienced by early career WOC come from a combination of external challenges with their colleagues and organization and internalized challenges with self-confidence. The findings suggest some of the unique strategies and tactics that early career WOC develop to navigate these challenges and lead social justice change. Peer relationships provide a highly appreciated and valuable source of support. The discussion concludes with suggestions for further research on the work experiences of early career WOC who are leading social justice change, as there are still many gaps in the research for this particular community that use an intersectional framework. The discussion also suggests numerous strategies that early WOC, allies, and social justice advocates can apply in their work, which include putting emphases on self-advocacy, collaboration, and community-building.
CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

One recent study found that more than 70% of student affairs professionals were women (Pritchard & McChesney, 2018). A closer look at the numbers reveals a different story about diversity in the profession, however. Women are underrepresented in student affairs senior leadership roles and instead hold entry-level positions in disproportionately high numbers (Pritchard & McChesney, 2018). Additionally, the racial and ethnic demographics of the profession do not match the growing diversity of today’s university student population; student affairs professionals of Hispanic and Asian descent are especially underrepresented in comparison to students of Hispanic and Asian descent (The Compass Report: Charting the Future of Student Affairs, 2022). The president of NASPA, the international student affairs professional association, recently stated that increasing the diversity of the student affairs workforce was a top priority and acknowledged that more progress was necessary to meet this goal (Pritchard & McChesney, 2018).

Increasing equity, diversity, and inclusion (DEI) in higher education is also a top priority for most student affairs professionals, according to a recent NASPA survey (The Compass Report: Charting the Future of Student Affairs, 2022). The survey showed that the majority of student affairs professionals agreed or strongly agreed that they had a high capacity to integrate DEI into their work. However, only half of respondents felt that they had the resources to lead DEI efforts at their organization and even fewer believed that their institution was adequately addressing DEI. Thus, empowering a more diverse student affairs workforce could benefit the career development of young professionals as well as strengthen institutional DEI efforts.
Early career student affairs professionals play a unique and critical role in supporting students, given that they are often closer in age and identity to the students whom they serve and often act as a first point of contact for students. The student affairs field is relatively young; one study found that the median starting age for new student affairs professionals was the lowest amongst all higher education professional groups (Pritchard & McChesney, 2018). However, despite this strong pipeline of young professionals, retention is an issue in the profession. Due to various challenges, 60% of student affairs professionals leave the field within 5 years of completing their graduate degrees (Dinise-Halter, 2017).

The data about the demographics and values of student affairs professionals suggest that early career professionals have great yet unsupported potential. If these early career student affairs professionals do not remain in higher education and advance in their careers, the middle and upper ranks of the profession will remain relatively homogenous. This, in turn, will have ripple effects on institutional DEI efforts and student support.

In order to support early career professionals in their careers, it is especially important to understand the experiences of those who have been especially marginalized in the student affairs profession, in higher education, and in society more broadly. Women, people of color, and early career professionals all experience various forms of systemic oppression. Thus, having a better understanding of the experiences of individuals who hold all of these identities—including their motivations, challenges, and strategies for navigating their work—can empower more of them to advance in their student affairs careers, increase diversity in higher education, and strengthen DEI and social justice efforts. This study sought to address this need through exploring the unique experiences of early career women of color (WOC) student affairs professionals, with a
focus on how their identities influenced their pursuit of social justice change in their organizations.

**Background and Need for This Study**

There has been a fair amount of research on student affairs professionals working in a variety of higher education settings (e.g., two-year community college, four-year college, research university, etc.) and functional areas (e.g., career advising, Greek life, residential life, etc.). The body of research includes contributions from various academic fields, including education, organizational theory, human resources/management, sociology, and others.

Most of the empirical research reviewed for this study was conducted using quantitative methodologies, including phenomenology, composite narrative, and case study. The primary data collection instrument used in the studies was the interview, but a few studies used other data collection methods as well, such as artifact analysis (Dinise-Halter, 2017). A smaller number of studies were qualitative, including some that used surveys and others that were systematic reviews of prior research.

Within the broader body of research about the student affairs profession, some studies have examined the work experience of individuals who were in the early stages of their careers, women, or people of color. This type of research focused on specific groups within the larger student affairs profession and helped to identify phenomena that affected members of that group in particular ways; insights discovered by this level of inquiry were otherwise obscured when members of these groups were grouped together with all other student affairs professionals.

A smaller subset of the research examined the experience of individuals at the intersection of two of the three areas of interest: early career, woman, and/or person of color. This type of analysis has helped to understand the unique experiences of individuals in relation
to their multiple identities. For example, Espino and Ariza's (2022) study of Latinx mid-level administrators advocating for equity-based change in their organizations identified unique challenges that advocates experienced due to their gender and race/ethnicity.

There is a gap in the literature when it comes to research that focuses on the experience of individuals who hold all three identities at once: as early career professionals, women, and people of color. Studies about the workplace experiences of such individuals that only focused on one dimension of their identity have told an incomplete story about the nature of the challenges that they have faced. Therefore, to more fully understand the experience of early career WOC, it is important to study their workplace experiences in the context of their different identities.

Additionally, the existing research regarding early career professionals has often been aimed at managers and educators; the research has been guided by interest in how managers could provide better training to their direct reports or how graduate programs could better prepare their students for their work. There have been fewer studies written with early career professionals as both the sources of information and the primary intended audience of the study results. The relationship between researcher and research subject has traditionally been one-sided, with more power given to the researcher. This study was designed to counteract that dynamic; I hoped that the study created a space for participants to share their lived experiences in a cathartic and empowering way, while also helping them to support other early career WOC.

**Purpose of the Study**

This study responded to the gaps in the literature about the experiences of early career WOC attempting to foster social justice-oriented change in their organizations. The three research questions that guided the study were:
1. How do early career WOC perceive the power dynamics that they encounter while pursuing social justice change in their organizations?

2. What strategies and tactics do they utilize to lead change efforts?

3. What aspects of their identities are the most salient to them during their change efforts?

The study design was based on a phenomenological methodology (Groenewald, 2004). This methodology focuses on understanding the essence of how individuals experience a particular phenomenon; the phenomenon of interest in this case was the pursuit of social justice-focused organizational change, from the perspectives of early career WOC.

**Limitations of the Study**

Although the study participant recruitment surpassed the original target number, the size and demographics of the participant pool was still reflective of the study’s logistical constraints, including a limited network, limited resources for participant compensation, and a limited timeframe. Some interviewees may have also felt uncomfortable speaking with full candor if they felt vulnerable about the topics of conversation. Lastly, there may have been a selection bias in the individuals who volunteered to be interviewed; the subset of individuals who had the inclination and availability to participate in this study may not have been representative of the full community of early career WOC.

This study focused on a more specific population than many prior studies of student affairs professionals. However, the study did not focus on WOC from a specific racial/ethnic identity, so it did not parse out the unique experiences and challenges that differently impact women from specific racial/ethnic backgrounds. Similarly, there are myriad other dimensions of personal and professional identity that would each lend an important lens of understanding to the early career WOC’s experience, such as physical ability, immigrant status, functional work area,
This study’s analysis did not focus on these other aspects of identity, but they are rich areas of opportunity for future research.

Significance of the Study

This study contributed to the body of research about the unique experiences of early career WOC who are pursuing social justice-oriented organizational change. In particular, the study examined how individuals at the confluence of different interpersonal and structural forms of disempowerment, due to their personal and professional identities, experience and navigate these dynamics.

Through using an intersectional analytical framework, the study offered a deeper understanding of these individuals’ experiences compared with studies that have focused on only one or two dimensions of their identities. The study helped to surface common experiences shared by early career WOC, which could help members of this group feel less alone in the workplace difficulties that they face. Without sharing these experiences and data, these challenges might feel like personal issues to be dealt with individually, rather than systematic issues that must be addressed institutionally.

Early career professionals are not often provided formal education about how to navigate interpersonal and organizational power dynamics, even though they are a significant and complicated part of the work experience. The results of this study could provide guidance for early career WOC to support themselves and each other in successfully navigating their work and leading social justice change.

Finally, this research could also educate those who are in formal positions of power in higher education, such as managers and senior administrators. The hope is that they can gain more empathy and respect for staff who do not hold as much privilege as they do and learn how
to better support these staff. Individual and institutional efforts to empower early career WOC would be less effective without a multifaceted lens of understanding about their experiences.

**Definition of Terms**

Several terms that were used throughout this study are defined below for clarity:

- A *colleague* is a collective term to describe the following professional relationships, as they relate to a given individual:
  - A *coworker* is a work colleague who works in the same organization but is not their supervisor.
  - A *peer* is a work colleague who shares the same job title and/or position in the organizational hierarchy.
  - A *supervisor* is an individual’s direct manager.
  - *Senior leadership* describes people who are two levels or above an individual in the organizational/institutional hierarchy.
  - A *mentor* is a person who is valued as a wise advisor.
  - An *outside affinity group* is an organized group of people with a shared identity and exist outside of an individual’s organization; sometimes these groups are within the same institution and sometimes they are external to the institution as well.

- An *institution* is a higher education entity, such as a college or university; it is an encompassing term that describes the entirety of all the units within the entity.

- A *student affairs professional* is an individual who works in higher education in one of the functional areas that support student development and learning outside of the formal classroom environment, as defined by NASPA (Functional Area Profiles, 2023).

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1 NASPA identified 39 functional areas that are often housed within student affairs divisions: Academic Advising, Admissions, Alumni Programs, Campus Activities, Campus Safety, Career Services, Civic Learning and Democratic
• An *organization* is a functional unit within the larger institution, e.g., a department, center, or institute.

• A *person of color (POC)* is an individual who identifies as Black, Indigenous, Pacific Islander, Asian, Latine/x, and/or multiracial for their race or ethnicity.

• A *strategy* describes a long-term goal.

• A *tactic* describes smaller, concrete actions that are guided by a greater strategy.

• A *woman of color (WOC)* is an individual who identifies 1) as a woman for her gender and 2) as Black, Indigenous, Pacific Islander, Asian, Latine/x, and/or multiracial for their race or ethnicity.
CHAPTER II
LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter presents the theoretical framework for this study, followed by a review of prior research in three areas: power dynamics in higher education, the early career professional work experience, and organizational change processes & strategies in higher education. Each area of the literature review includes definitions of relevant concepts, examples of how these concepts interact with the individual work experience, organizational contexts, and how identity was factored into the research. Throughout the chapter, recurring themes and gaps in the reviewed research are also identified.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study was drawn primarily from intersectionality theory, introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) in her seminal paper. She argued that viewing a person’s experiences through only a single dimension limited the ability to fully understand that person’s lived experiences. She presented the concept of intersectionality as a multidimensional inquiry that understood that an individual who held multiple marginalized identities experienced oppression in ways that were different and compounded, in comparison to an individual who held fewer marginalized identities. To illustrate, Crenshaw’s paper detailed how the oppression of Black women was uniquely different from the oppression experienced by Black men with gender privilege or White women with race privilege. Intersectionality theory identifies how multiple systematic inequities intersect to shape the experiences of and oftentimes oppress marginalized people.

This study used intersectionality as a framework to understand the work experiences of early career WOC more deeply. A prior study that examined the experience of early career professionals through an intersectional lens was Sánchez et al.’s study (2021), which focused on
the workplace experiences of early career Latina higher education administrators. For their theoretical framework, the researchers utilized a Chicana feminist perspective, which uplifts the voices of Chicanas/Latinas and recognizes the interconnectedness of the multiple identities that many Chicanas/Latinas hold, including race, gender, ethnicity, class, and immigration status. Using this framework, Sánchez et al. were able to find themes and connections between their study participants’ identities and their work experiences. Their findings, which included participants’ experiences of toning down race/ethnicity in the workplace, the intersection of their identities, and navigating the profession, were made possible by having the Chicana feminist perspective and intersectionality guide the study design. This study continued the inquiry started by Sánchez et al.’s study, but with a broader array of WOC from different racial and ethnic backgrounds and a narrower focus on their social justice advocacy.

**Power Dynamics in Higher Education**

This section of the literature review examines the research on power dynamics in higher education organizations and institutions, with an emphasis on the ways that they affect how individuals experience and navigate these settings. The review also addresses how individuals of different identities can be differently affected by organizational power dynamics. Like this study, the literature review focuses on dynamics occurring at the micro- (individual and interpersonal) and meso- (organizational) levels, rather than the macro- (societal) level.

**Definitions of Power**

This study referenced the definition of power offered by Pfeffer (1981) as being “a force sufficient to change the behavior of others and achieve a desired outcome” that is “context- and relationship-specific” and “typically becomes rooted in institutional structures, moving beyond individuals” (as cited in Sánchez et al., 2021).
Power can take many forms; the main expressions of power that the social psychologists French and Raven identified were (Lewicki et al., 2016):

- Expert power, derived from having unique, in-depth information about a topic
- Reward power, derived from the ability to reward people for desired behavior
- Coercive power, derived from the ability to punish people for undesired behavior
- Legitimate power, derived from holding an official position that has powers granted to it
- Referent power, derived from gaining the respect of others through personal attributes

Individuals and groups can wield different and often multiple forms of power at once. The most effective forms of power are highly dependent on the situational context and changing dynamics. For example, a monarch may rule through a combination of coercive and legitimate power, yet they may also be toppled by a coup led by a rival with greater reward and referent power.

**Power Dynamics at the Micro-Level**

This section of the literature review examines the ways that power dynamics manifest as forms of disempowerment. Power dynamics describes the asymmetrical balances of power that exist between different individuals and groups. Disempowerment describes the ways that these power imbalances are enforced and the effects of that enforcement upon the individuals and groups with less power.

In her research on the obstacles encountered by faculty and staff leading bottom-up organizational change, Kezar (2011) conducted an instrumental case study that included interviews with 84 staff and 81 faculty at varying levels of authority in their organizations; there was a gender balance amongst her study’s participants, but a proportionately higher number of participants were people of color and low-income individuals. She identified five distinctive forms of power dynamics and classified them, from the most subtle to the covert, as:
microaggressions, inertia, controlling, silencing, and oppression. The following sections draw upon Kezar’s as well as others’ research to describe each of these forms of disempowerment.

**Microaggressions & Bullying**

A *microaggression* is a comment or action that subtly conveys a prejudiced attitude about a marginalized group (Kezar, 2011). *Hierarchical microaggression* was a term introduced by Young et al. (2015) to describe a particular type of microaggression that is directed at individuals who hold less powerful positions in an organization (as cited in Lee, 2022).

*Bullying* describes a series of repeatedly disempowering behaviors, while a microaggression describes a single and often more covertly disempowering interaction (Lee, 2022). In her survey of 401 staff at various four-year baccalaureate degree granting colleges and universities in the United, Hollis (2014) discovered that younger workers (those 35 years or younger), were more likely to have experienced bullying than the general population; 71% of the survey respondents in this demographic reported that they had had experienced workplace bullying, compared with 62% of the general population of survey respondents.

Lee (2022) conducted a systematic review of 187 scholarly articles (i.e., peer-reviewed articles, dissertations, and books) pertaining to microaggression and bullying incidents at colleges and universities in the United States. Her study found that individuals who held inferior or lower-ranked positions in their organizations, such as front-line staff, tended to be victims of microaggressions and bullying, whereas people in higher-ranked positions, such as supervisors, tended to be the perpetrators of these incidents. In addition, Lee found that identity and social status also impacted the degree to which individuals experienced hierarchical microaggressions. For example, employees from socially marginalized backgrounds were especially vulnerable to workplace microaggressions. In addition, although people in higher-ranked positions were
generally more likely to be the perpetrators of microaggressions, Lee found that individuals with higher-ranked positions but from socially marginalized backgrounds were victims of *contra-hierarchical microaggressions*; this term describes when lower-ranked individuals express microaggressions toward higher-ranked individuals (Richardson Fraser, 2017 as cited in Lee, 2022). For example, higher-ranked administrators who came from underrepresented backgrounds were more likely than other administrators to be treated disrespectfully by their supervisees.

**Inertia**

Inertia is a form of disempowerment in which the institution saps away individuals’ most valuable resources: their time (Kezar, 2011). One tactic used by institutions to create inertia was by sending subtle signals that change was not a priority for the institution. Kezar found that this tactic was most often applied to faculty and appeared to be more effective in disempowering them, as compared with direct oppression and silencing; these latter tactics are described further below.

Another form of inertia occurs when employees receive mixed signals from their supervisors about how they should proceed with their work. Berti and Simpson (2021) termed these exhausting quagmires as *organizational pragmatic paradoxes*; they are created when supervisors issue contradictory demands that their supervisees do not have adequate resources or agency to respond to. An example of this phenomenon is when a manager tells an employee to develop a DEI-focused project but then obstructs their employee’s efforts to fulfill their assignment.

**Controlling**

Controlling describes attempts to restrict individuals’ behaviors and actions (Kezar, 2011). For example, Kezar found institutions that placed restrictions on when and how change
leaders organized or even held their meetings. She also found that this was the most common tactic used to suppress faculty, although it was also used to suppress staff as well.

**Silencing**

Silencing describes situations in which affected individuals are made to feel invisible and powerless in their institutions; silenced individuals may even start to question the validity of their own efforts (Kezar, 2011). Kezar found that this tactic was most often used on staff. Silencing was typically not as effective when applied to faculty, except at institutions that were more hierarchical, where faculty held less power relative to the administration.

**Oppression**

Oppression is an overt form of disempowerment in which individuals’ jobs and livelihoods are threatened by attempts to get them demoted or fired (Kezar, 2011). Kezar found that this type of disempowerment was almost exclusively used on staff; faculty—even those who did not have the job security of tenure—experienced oppression only in rare and extreme circumstances.

**Impacts of Power Dynamics at the Micro-Level**

The prior section described the various ways that power dynamics are expressed as disempowerment. This next section reviews the impacts that disempowerment can have on affected individuals.

**Reduced Agency**

Agency describes how much an individual within a social structure or institution is able think and act with autonomy. It emphasizes a person’s ability to have full consciousness and free will in their choices and actions (Berti & Simpson, 2021). The amount of agency that an individual possesses is dynamic and highly dependent on contextual factors. In practical terms,
everyone has various constraints on how they navigate social settings, but an individual with more agency will feel more freedom in doing so. In contrast, individuals who have less agency are more constrained in the choices and actions that they make.

**Reduced Cognitive Imagination**

Being disempowered can affect the ability to conceptualize ways to improve the situation. The sociologist Steven Lukes stated:

> It is the most insidious exercise of power to prevent people from having grievances by shaping their perceptions, cognitions and preferences in such a way that they accept their role in the existing order of things, either because they can see or imagine no alternative to it, or because they see it as natural and unchangeable, or because they value it as divinely ordained and beneficial. (as cited in Jo & Park, 2016, p. 396)

One example of this phenomenon was shown in Kezar's (2011) aforementioned study of grassroots leaders’ encounters with power dynamics. When she interviewed staff attempting to advocate for better working conditions, they mostly focused on their inability to make meaningful progress in the face of opposition; they did not explore possible productive strategies such as coalition building or opportunities to engage with administrators. The interviewees seemed to have trouble imagining solutions that could improve their situations; when it came to feeling powerless, perception had become reality.

**Structuring of Power Dynamics at the Meso-Level**

The next section of the literature review moves beyond the individual experience to examine how organizational structures create and maintain power imbalances.
**Organizational Structure**

The way an organization is structured influences how individuals within the organization encounter power dynamics. The sociologist Joan Acker (2006) argued that different organizations have different levels of inequality based on particular characteristics. She found that organizations with steeper hierarchies (i.e., those with a greater difference in power between the highest and lowest levels of the organization) tend to have more prevalent and severe forms of inequality.

Olson et al.'s research (2023) of higher education leadership and management processes found similar results. The researchers developed a composite narrative based on a combination of the four study authors’ experiences working as faculty at public universities; within the author group, there was geographical, disciplinary, and gender/ethnic diversity. The authors compared institutional responsiveness to racism at two types of institutions: mechanistic, structuralist institutions and organic, post-structuralist institutions. The former institution type was structured by a traditional hierarchy, with vertical communication, emphasis on formal processes, and structured decision-making; institutions with these characteristics are also commonly known as bureaucracies. In contrast, the latter type of institution was less rigid, had more horizontal communication channels, invited broader participation, and gave workers more freedom to define their roles.

Olson et al. (2023) found that the post-structuralist institutions were more supportive of their faculty’s efforts to address racism. The structuralist organizations seemed comparatively ill-equipped to respond clearly and decisively to concerns about racism. The authors argued that bureaucracies are largely ineffective in confronting these issues because they prioritize preservation of the existing system, rather than pursuit of ethical ideals.
Identity and the Experience of Organizational Power Dynamics

The research summarized in this section of the literature review indicated that a person’s experience of organizational power dynamics is influenced by their identities, including race, gender, and age. For example, Lee's (2022) study found that an individual’s experience of microaggressions and bullying was affected not only by their position in their organization’s hierarchy, but also by whether they were in a socially marginalized group. Similarly, Kezar (2011) found that staff, who typically hold less power than faculty, were more likely to be subject to the most overt forms of disempowerment, as compared to faculty.

Classical theories of power, like those of Max Weber (1947) and Talcott Parsons (1954), tended to conceptualize power as a resource that can be simply acquired or transferred, like a material resource (as cited in Jo & Park, 2016). These classical theories of power did not examine the systems- and relationship-based nature of power and therefore were limited in their ability to identify power dynamics and analyze the effects of disempowerment.

In contrast to traditional theories of power, critical theories of power have offered conceptualizations that examine domination and subordination (Jo & Park, 2016). Foucault, for instance, viewed power as a product of relationships and focused on the mechanisms through which power is enforced. These critical theories thus provide useful frameworks for analyzing the interacting dimensions of race, gender, and power at both the individual and organizational level.

Early Career Professional Work Experience

This section of the literature review examines research on the work experiences of early career student affairs professionals. It starts by reviewing research on the common challenges that early career professionals encounter at work and the impacts of these challenges. The section
continues by reviewing how early career professionals navigate their workplaces and common areas of learning for them during their first few years on the job. The section concludes by reviewing how the characteristics of an early career professional’s organization/institution and their identities can also influence their work experience.

**Workplace Challenges**

A common challenge for early career professionals is being simultaneously underpaid and overworked (The Compass Report: Charting the Future of Student Affairs, 2022). Support for career development is also often meager (Renn & Hodges, 2007). Early career professionals who are POC can have an especially difficult time finding mentors, role models who share their identities, and clear pathways to advance their careers (Sánchez et al., 2021).

Early career professionals who are POC or specifically WOC also experience challenges related to their racial/ethnic identities. For example, the early career Latina professionals in Sánchez et al.’s (2021) felt pressured to tone down expressions of their cultural identities in order to fit into their predominantly White workplaces. They also encountered microaggressions, such as being mistaken for custodial staff, that conveyed stereotyped assumptions about their racial/ethnic identities.

Finally, as noted in the power dynamics section of this literature review, early career professionals are also prone to hierarchical microaggressions and bullying by more powerful colleagues, especially if they are from marginalized groups (Hollis, 2014; Lee, 2022).

**Impact of Workplace Challenges**

Workplace challenges have multiple negative impacts on early career professionals, including low morale. One source of low morale for early career professionals with marginalized
identities is not feeling a sense of belonging or the freedom to express themselves in their workplaces; this can lead to feelings of frustration and demotivation (Sánchez et al., 2021).

Being asked to do too much with too few resources can also lead to high levels of stress and burnout (Hollis, 2014). Especially when challenges are severe, prolonged, and unmitigated, there can be serious and long-term impacts on mental and physical health, and in the worse cases cause self-harm (Hollis, 2014).

**Navigating the Work Experience**

One common response when faced with severe and prolonged workplace challenges is to leave the organization/institution; as mentioned in Chapter 1, sometimes early career professionals also choose to leave the student affairs field entirely (Lee, 2022; Renn & Hodges, 2007). Early career professionals who choose to stay develop various strategies and tactics to respond to workplace challenges; this next section of the literature review explores some of these tools in more detail.

**Gaining Competence**

Early career professionals can struggle with feeling confident about their abilities at work. In their longitudinal study of student affairs professionals in their first year of full-time work, Renn and Hodges (2007) identified gaining competency as an important part of their learning trajectory. In addition to actually becoming more competent at their work through developing relevant knowledge, skills, and experience, Renn and Hodges also identified the importance of feeling competent (e.g., developing self-confidence and self-efficacy) and appearing competent (e.g., meeting colleagues’ expectations).
Building Relationships

Relationships are an important part of early career professionals’ work experience; these include relationships both inside and outside of the workplace, and both positive and stressful relationships (Renn & Hodges, 2007). As they progressed in their first year of work, the participants of Renn and Hodges's study increasingly valued the relationships with people outside of their organization, such as friends, family, and colleagues from other units in the institution. Their relationships with friends and family helped the participants have a better work/life balance. Meanwhile, meeting people elsewhere in their institutions helped them build their professional network and their sense of connection to a larger community.

Dinise-Halter's (2017) constructivist case study about challenge and support for early career professionals involved four participants who had completed their graduate degrees one to three years earlier; the subjects worked at various universities in the United States and in a range of student affairs positions. The study participants named mentors, colleagues in their organization, colleagues in their institution, and outside affinity groups as important sources of emotional and professional support. Dinise-Halter found that early career professionals who received these types of support felt more competent in their roles, were more willing to engage in learning, and were more open to having challenging learning opportunities. The nature of emotional and professional support offered by each of their relationships varied; for example, mentors helped to process experiences, offered an outside perspective, and gave emotional support, encouragement, and validation. Similarly, the Latina early career professionals in Sánchez et al.'s (2021) study also found that it was helpful for them to reflect with others about their experiences of feeling out of place and unsupported at work.
Developing Political Savvy

During their first years of work, early career professionals develop a better sense of how to navigate office politics and complex power dynamics in order to successfully do their work (Renn & Hodges, 2007). Although they have limited power to effect large-scale change at their organizations, some early career professionals identify spheres of influence, i.e., opportunities within their direct areas of responsibility, through which they can effect change (Duran et al., 2022). Sometimes the tactics that are effective for navigating workplace difficulties come at a personal cost. For example, the early career Latina administrators subjects in Sánchez et al.’s (2021) study learned that to fit in at their predominantly White institutions, they had to downplay their expressions of their identities.

Learning from the Work Experience

This section reviews how early career professionals change and grow as a result of their work experiences. A positive work experience does not necessarily mean a challenge-free one; challenging experiences can provide growth and learning opportunities, given the presence of supporting factors such as a good institutional fit and good supervisory support (Dinise-Halter, 2017). In her 2017 study, Dinise-Halter even found that first time student affairs professionals desired to be pushed out of their comfort zone in order to grow as student affairs professionals. Interviewees can also find their work to be meaningful even if it is challenging; an interviewee in Sánchez et al.’s (2021) study expressed that she intended to stay in her role because despite how emotionally taxing it was, she also found it to be a rewarding way to support students.

Identity and Sense of Self

Early career professionals developed a stronger sense of self during the first years of their work, including more awareness of their identities, professional goals, and personal values
(Duran et al., 2022; Renn & Hodges, 2007; Sánchez et al., 2021). Although their identities as Latinas were the most salient to them, the interviewees in Sánchez et al.’s study also spoke about how deeply their other identities (e.g., as women, first-generation college graduates, etc.) were intertwined with their Latina identities. Sometimes the increased awareness of their identities was associated with negative experiences like encountering microaggressions; at other times the increased awareness was associated with empowering experiences like being able to share their identities with others.

Early career professionals’ self-confidence at work also changes over time—both increasing and decreasing depending on a variety of factors. **Self-efficacy** describes how confident an individual feels about their ability to effect the outcome that they are seeking (Duran et al., 2022). **Competence** describes how confident an individual about their work-related skills and knowledgeable (Renn & Hodges, 2007). Finally, **imposter syndrome** describes a phenomenon in which an individual believes that they did not earn the right to be where they are, despite their accomplishments and all outward evidence to the contrary; this phenomenon was first recognized to be particularly prevalent and intensely felt by high-achieving women (Clance & Imes, 1978).

**Awareness of Organizational Dynamics**

As they gain work experience, early career professionals also develop an increased, more nuanced understanding of the power and relationship dynamics in their organizations. The subjects of Duran et al.’s (2022) study, for example, were able to examine their organizations’ dynamics through a critical leadership lens. Similarly, the subjects in Sánchez et al.’s (2021) study became increasingly aware about the complexities of navigating their work as Latinas.
Contextual Factors

The preceding sections of this literature review examined early career professionals’ navigation of their work experiences. This next section examines the environmental and organizational contexts that influence their experiences.

Education

Formal Training. Many, but not all, early career student affairs professionals have graduate degrees. In one survey of student affairs staff who were 35 years or younger, 55.7% had a master’s degree as their highest degree while 30% had a bachelor’s degree as their highest degree (Hollis, 2014). Common questions in the research have been how prepared early career professionals are for their first jobs in student affairs and if/how their formal education could better prepare them for their work.

Individuals without a formal education in student affairs mainly learn about their profession while on the job. That said, guidance about navigating the workplace is often lacking in the curricula of student affairs programs as well. For example, Renn and Hodges (2007) conducted a longitudinal study of 10 recent graduates of a student affairs master’s program at a large, public research university; participants were sent monthly open-ended questions about their experiences, challenges, and surprises during their first year in their roles. Their participants felt that their graduate programs could have done more to educate them about organizational power dynamics and how to lead change from positions of low power.

Duran et al. (2022) studied graduates of one master’s program that did introduce its students to these concepts through a critical leadership course entitled “Leadership in Higher Education Contexts.” Students in the course learned how to identify, analyze, and critique power with regards to social identity and positionality. The researchers interviewed nine early career
professionals who took the course and examined how effectively the subjects were able to translate concepts from the course into their post-graduate work. Their findings indicated that being introduced to concepts of power and positionality as graduate students did indeed help them identify and navigate power dynamics as early career professionals. For example, the interviewees attributed their coursework to helping them feel more confident about sharing critical perspectives at conferences and with their students.

**On-The-Job Learning.** Many early career professionals learn or deepen their knowledge and skills while on the job (Goodman & Templeton, 2021). One element of on-the-job training is *socialization*, defined as “the process by which new members of an organization come to understand, appreciate, and adopt the customs, traditions, values, and goals of their profession and their new organization” (Tull et al., 2019 as cited in Dinise-Halter, 2017, p. 2). Socialization can help early career professionals adjust to the norms of their workplace. However, as discussed earlier, it can also lead to individuals feeling forced to behave according to the dominant cultural narrative and downplay their personal identities and perspectives. This can be especially true for early career professionals of color who are working in predominantly White institutions (Duran et al., 2022; Sánchez et al., 2021).

**Supervisor Relationship**

A good supervisor is a hugely beneficial resource for an early career professional in navigating their new role; they can serve as mentors who guide them through the pitfalls and intricacies of the workplace, open doors and pathways for further career development, and foster a healthy work environment (Dinise-Halter, 2017; Hollis, 2014; Renn & Hodges, 2007). Conversely, a bad supervisor can contribute a great deal to workplace stress and frustration for an early career professional. Sometimes, a supervisor can be both a source of challenge as well
as a source of support, as indicated by Dinise-Halter's (2017) study about challenge and support for early career professionals. For example, supervisors who speak on behalf of an early career professional can lend credibility to their work, yet it can also be frustrating for early career professionals to find that their ideas are not taken as seriously without assistance. Early career professionals can also become frustrated when they realize that supervisors can be mentors, but not all supervisors will be enthusiastic or suitable mentors (Renn & Hodges, 2007).

**Institutional Fit**

*Institutional fit* is the compatibility of an individual’s identity, values, and workstyle with the place where they work. This concept appeared repeatedly in the reviewed literature as an important factor in how successful early career professionals felt in their roles (Dinise-Halter, 2017; Renn & Hodges, 2007). Early career professionals who found a good institutional fit felt supported by their workplace. However, the research also showed that oftentimes early career professionals did not find alignment with their institutions; the realization that there was an institutional misfit often grew during their first year on the job (Renn & Hodges, 2007).

Poor institutional fit can have multiple negative impacts on early career professionals’ work experience and activities. Early career professionals who try to lead social justice-change can sometimes find themselves working in unsupportive or hostile institutions. For example, the early career professionals in Duran et al.'s (2022) and Sánchez et al.'s (2021) studies felt that they worked at institutions that prioritized privileged groups, which meant that institutional decision-making and policies often do not take marginalized groups’ experiences and impacts into consideration.

Early career professionals from unrepresented groups also felt the impacts of poor institutional fit on their sense of belonging. Sánchez et al. (2021) interviewed eight early career
Latina higher education administrators who had fewer than five years of full-time experience in higher education. They found that their interview subjects were highly conscious about poor institutional fit as they navigated dominant cultures and institutions of whiteness.

**Organizational Structure**

The policies, protocols, and procedures that define an organization/institution can also affect the early career professional’s workplace experience. Being in organizations without clear mission and vision can make early career professionals feel directionless in their work (Renn & Hodges, 2007). Some early career professionals discover that their organization has a scarcity of resources, including staffing, funding, or political will, to support their work.

**Identity and the Early Career Work Experience**

This section of the literature review presented key features of the early career professional work experience and contextual factors that shape the experience. A theme throughout many of the reviewed studies is that identity can have a large impact in how an early career professional experiences their work. Many studies of early career professionals acknowledged the importance of age as an identity, since many early career professionals are on the younger end of the workforce age spectrum. However, aside from the Sánchez et al. (2021) study, few studies have viewed the early career work experience specifically through the lens of racial/ethnic and gender identity.

**Organizational Change Processes & Strategies in Higher Education**

This section of the literature review addresses prior research on organizational change processes and strategies, with a particular focus on higher education. It begins with an overview of different organizational change models. Next, it reviews obstacles that change-makers can
encounter during the organizational change process and tools used in response to these obstacles. Finally, the section addresses evolving perceptions of organizational change.

**Organizational Change Models**

Different models for organizational change have focused on different aspects of the process. For example, Morley and Eadie’s change portfolio management model focuses on identifying concrete, short-term initiatives, while Kotter’s eight-stage change process provides a comprehensive model for managers to lead change (Atkins, 2010).

Kotter’s (1996) change model is comprised of eight steps (as cited in Spencer & Winn, 2004): 1) Create a sense of urgency, 2) Build a guiding coalition, 3) Form a strategic vision for change, 4) Communicate the vision, 5) Remove obstacles, 6) Create short-term wins, 7) Consolidate improvements, and 8) Anchor the changes. The model has traditionally been applied in a linear, top-down way.

In their study of a major change process in an engineering department at a Hispanic-serving research university in the southwestern United States, Kang et al. (2022) used the Kotter change model for analysis. Using structures, symbols, people, and power as analytical lenses, their study identified key contextual factors in the change process and detailed how Kotter’s change model is applied in a higher education setting. Their study was one of the first to apply Kotter’s model in an iterative and non-linear manner (Kang et al., 2022).

**Obstacles to Effecting Organizational Change**

Change leaders often encounter obstacles throughout the change process. Sometimes obstacles arise due to the focus of the change efforts, while other times obstacles arise due to the identities of the person(s) leading the change. Obstacles can be encountered both at the interpersonal/micro-level and the organizational/meso-level.
Obstacles Due to the Focus of Change Efforts

Change efforts that challenge existing power dynamics can experience a higher amount of resistance (Espino & Ariza, 2022). Because the nature of social justice is to question the status quo, social justice advocates can frequently meet this type of resistance. Harrison (2010) conducted a participatory research study with six student affairs professionals engaged in advocacy; all were mid-career professionals who worked at private and public higher education institutions in California, with five or more years of experience and with titles that were at least director level and below vice-provost or vice-president level. Four were Caucasian and two were Asian American, with an even split between women and men. Harrison found that participants who reframed their advocacy work as simply student resource development faced less obstruction than those who spoke of an obligation to challenge power structures as a part of their work. In other words, participants were more successful in their advocacy when they framed their work in ways that were more amenable to their institutions’ power brokers.

Espino and Ariza (2022) found similar trends in their research on Latinx/a/o mid-level administrators and concluded that the private universities at which their subjects maintained White privilege “by diminishing the agency of Latinx/a/o mid-level administrators to enact justice and equity within the organizational structure” (p. 5).

Obstacles Due to the Identity of Change Leader

Social justice change makers who hold marginalized identities must tread especially carefully in their work. Espino and Ariza (2022) found that the Latinx/a/o mid-level administrators in their study encountered numerous challenges with institutional racism and stereotypes about their racial/ethnic identities. For example, behaviors that might have been considered confident and assertive if exhibited by a White administrator could be considered
arrogant or pompous by a Latinx/a/o administrator. Similarly, a collaborative, democratic leadership style employed by a female change leader could be viewed as a weakness and sign of indecisiveness, rather than a deliberate leadership tactic and strength. Other research has also shown that that racially and ethnically minoritized professionals who adhere to White workplace norms are more likely to have access to institutional resources, indicating that whiteness is viewed as credential for accessing power and status (Espino & Ariza, 2022).

**Obstacles Due to the Nature of the Organization**

Some challenges to organizational change arise from the nature of the organization itself. As discussed earlier in the literature review, Olson et al. (2023) found that post-structuralist organizations were more supportive of efforts to address racism than mechanistic organizations. Additionally, change leaders can find it challenging to discover a lack of alignment between their personal goals and that of their institution or a contradiction between what the institution says are its goals/values and how change leaders are treated. Espino and Ariza (2022) argued that navigating spaces like these that “are paradoxical in nature can create a constant tension that midlevel administrators must engage in to pursue institutional change” (p. 2).

**Organizational Change Resources**

To surmount the obstacles described in the prior section and achieve their goals, organizational change leaders draw upon various resources, strategies, and tactics.

**Leadership Strategy**

Different leadership approaches are utilized by change leaders; the styles can overlap, and the right approach varies by the individual change leader and the context in which they work. Grassroots leadership focuses on change through non-hierarchical and collective processes
(Kezar et al., 2011). This approach contrasts with more top-down and hierarchical leadership styles.

The term tempered radical describes change leaders who work from within their organizations to lead transformative change. As described by the person who developed the phrase, tempered radicals are:

Not heroic leaders of revolutionary change; rather, they are cautious and committed, . . . organizational insiders who contribute and succeed in their jobs. At the same time, they are treated as outsiders because they represent ideals or agendas that are somehow at odds with the dominant culture (Meyerson, 2003 as cited in Harrison, 2011, p. 48).

Finally, transformational leadership places an emphasis on engagement with others and raising the level of motivation and morality in both leaders and followers (Harrison, 2011).

**Education**

Education is an important resource for being an effective change leader. By studying the nature of change and power, would-be change leaders can approach their work in a more strategic way (Duran et al., 2022). As Harrison argued, “Without both an acknowledgment and understanding of how power works in higher education institutions, individual student affairs practitioners are left with a mandate to affect change, but no tools for translating this vision into reality” (2011, p. 46). Kezar also noted that education provides a vital psychological protection to social justice change leaders, because "the literature on power/oppression suggests that people are less able to navigate these conditions if they are unaware of unjust power inequalities and are more likely to internalize the views about inferiority and think that oppression is justified" (Kezar, 2011, p. 473).

**Political Savvy**
Change leaders who are cognizant about the power dynamics in their workplace can adapt their behaviors accordingly. Examples of this include the change leaders discussed earlier in this chapter who downplayed their racial/ethnic identities or the social justice nature of their work (Espino & Ariza, 2022; Harrison, 2010).

**Relationships**

Kezar et al. (2011) found that strong relationships are an important resource to change leaders. Their study indicated that grassroots leaders made use of both on-campus networks (e.g., colleagues, coalitions, etc.) and off-campus networks (e.g., nonprofits, advocacy groups, peer groups, etc.) to support each other. The support that these groups offered each other included sharing strategies about navigating power dynamics and creating coalitions and allies to jointly push back against disempowerment.

**Self-Confidence**

Having a strong and positive sense of self is also important to helping change leaders be successful in their work. Espino and Ariza's (2022) study indicated that having a strong sense of agency and self-efficacy was especially helpful for employees of color to navigate white patriarchal environments. Conversely, a lack of preparation or education about the realities of organizational change work can have a detrimental effect on individuals’ sense of agency and self-efficacy (Duran et al., 2022; Harrison, 2011; Kezar, 2011).

**Evolving Perceptions of Organizational Change**

Early research on organizational change came from the management and business fields and most assumed mechanistic, structuralist models of organizations. The prevailing assumption was that change processes were managed by an organization’s leaders, i.e., the individuals with leadership titles who were at the top of the organizational chart (Allen & Cherry, 2003). Most
early research also did not examine organizational change in higher education specifically, or investigate if and how organizational change in higher education might be unique from other sectors (Kezar, 2001).

In the early 2000s, Allen and Cherry (2003) challenged longstanding assumptions that organizational change could only be initiated by those at the top of the organization, that other individuals were unable to make a difference in their organizations, and that change processes were controllable and happened incrementally. Instead, they presented a new perspective that student affairs professionals—even those in more entry-level or mid-level positions—could also be change agents.

More recently, Harrison (2011) has critiqued how Allen and Cherry’s article did not adequately acknowledge the role of power dynamics on grassroots change processes and change leaders. She argued that the idea of transformational leadership, though optimistic and inspiring, was limited when it did not address the realities of how “power structures push back hard against those who challenge them” (Harrison, 2011, p. 47).

The research conducted by Harrison and Allen and Cherry offer a useful lens for understanding the dynamics of bottom-up/grassroots change processes. By combining Allen and Cherry’s and Harrison’s perspectives, this study examined the activity of grassroots change leaders through the contextual lenses of power and intersectionality.

**Identity and the Organizational Change Process**

The research reviewed in this section demonstrated that not all organizational change efforts are pursued nor experienced in the same way. The experiences of organizational change leaders, the challenges that they encounter, and the outcomes of their efforts are influenced both by the nature of the change as well as the identities of the change leader.
Summary of Literature Review

This literature review examined prior research in three areas: power dynamics in higher education, the early career professional work experience, and higher education organizational change processes. There were many recurring themes across these three areas, such as 1) the challenges that individuals experienced in their work, 2) the tools and strategies that such individuals used to navigate their work, given the challenges they experienced, and 3) the influence of contextual factors like education, institutional fit, and identity in how individuals navigated and experienced their work.

Although the literature review presented each of these areas sequentially, it is important to view them all together through an intersectional lens in order to gain deeper understanding about the experience of leading social justice change for individuals with marginalized identities. One can better understand the experiences shared by the participants in the Sánchez et al. (2021) study after appreciating that they simultaneously experienced the challenges of being an early career professional and WOC; similarly, the experiences shared by the participants in the Espino and Ariza (2022) can be better understand as arising from the intersection of their identities as Latinx/a/o staff and social justice advocates.

In the spirit of this intersectional approach, this study explored the myriad factors that shaped the work experiences of early career WOC leading social justice change. It sought to illuminate how the individuals at the intersection of all these contextual factors navigated their workplace, especially with regards to leading social justice change.
CHAPTER III
METHODOLOGY

Restatement of Purpose

This study sought to fill gaps in the literature about the experience of early career WOC pursuing social justice change in their organizations. In particular, the study explored about how individuals at a confluence of different interpersonal and structural power dynamics—through their formal position in the organizational chart, their gender/racial/ethnic identity, and their workplace activities—experienced and navigated these power dynamics.

Research Design

This study uses a phenomenological methodology (Groenewald, 2004). A phenomenology focuses on understanding the essence of how individuals experience a particular phenomenon—in this case, the experience of working on organizational social justice change. The purpose of a phenomenology is to surface, rather than presume, the essence of the experience being studied. Participants have the freedom to identify and share what they consider to be the important aspects of their experiences, how they interpret their experiences, and how their experiences connect to other aspects of their lives and identities.

I decided to use this methodology because the study was focused on understanding how individuals of particular identities perceived and navigated their work experiences. I was also interested in comparing and contrasting the experiences of different individuals with shared identities and shared interest in social justice; therefore, a phenomenological methodology was better suited to my goals than a case study, which would have explored the experiences of different individuals in a shared setting, or a narrative study, which would have examined a much broader scope of individuals’ experiences.
Population and Sample

The study participant recruitment process focused on individuals who self-identified as being WOC, at an early stage in their student affairs careers, and interested in social justice change. To have a shared setting for data collection, participant recruitment was limited to individuals who were currently working as student affairs professionals at a particular higher education institution located in the western United States. This institution is a large public research university with several campuses located throughout the state; individuals at any of the institution’s campuses were eligible to participate. The study used a purposive sampling method, in which participants are selected if they meet a particular set of characteristics. This sampling method was appropriate given that the study was focused on a particular population.

All the study participants self-identified as early career WOC, but there was variability in their racial/ethnic identities, as well as how many years they had been in their current roles. This study focused on analyzing a subset of six interviews from the larger dataset of 13 collected interviews. These six individuals were chosen from the full group of interviewees because they were the most junior in age, seniority in their current organization, and position in the organizational hierarchy. Because this study was focused on how systems of oppression impact individuals with marginalized identities, I hypothesized that the effects of oppression related to age and organizational hierarchy would be the most apparent with this group.

Table 1 below provides an overview of the six interviewees’ pseudonyms and race(s). Interviewees also provided other demographic, educational, and professional information, but that level of detail is not published in the table in order to provide more anonymity to the study participants. The ethnicities represented amongst the interviewees included several of Asian, Latin American, American Indigenous, and European origin; a few individuals identified as
multiracial. The interviewees also represented different areas of student affairs, such as admissions, program/event coordination, and advising. Interviewees ranged in age from 24 to 31 years old and had been in their current roles between 6 months to 3 years.

**Table 1**

*Interview Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Race(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aria</td>
<td>Asian, White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carla</td>
<td>American Indian, White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hope</td>
<td>Asian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessica</td>
<td>Asian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mia</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nora</td>
<td>Asian, White</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Instrumentation**

This study used two instruments for data collection: a pre-interview intake survey (see Appendix A) and a semi-structured interview (see Appendix B). The intake survey collected relevant information about work, educational, and personal backgrounds. Collecting this data before the interviews provided more time during the interviews to focus on the interview protocol questions.

I chose a semi-structured interview protocol as the principal study instrument; it was well-matched for this study’s methodology because it allows for a guided yet flexible exploration of topics shared by the interviewee (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). This methodology explores how different people experience a common phenomenon; thus, having a pre-planned list of questions created consistency between interviews and ensured that each one explored the topics that were relevant to my study. On the other hand, using a semi-structured protocol also allowed for small impromptu adjustments to be made the question list to explore important topics shared by the
interviewee; with a structured interview protocol, I would have needed to rigidly adhere to a standard interview script.

The questions in the interview protocol were developed in an iterative process. Each question was designed to elicit data that could help to answer one or more of the research questions. The protocol was revised several times, in particular after receiving feedback from my capstone advisor and after two test interviews with volunteer subjects.

**Human Subjects Approval**

This study is covered under the blanket approval (Protocol #1438) that was given to Dr. Seenae Chong from the University of San Francisco Institutional Review Board, for student work conducted in Spring 2024 in the capstone course O&L 655. This approval is intended to protect respondents and minimize risk to human subjects. In addition, I (Amy Dinh), the researcher conducting this study, completed the “Human Subjects Research” course accredited by the Collaborative Institutional Training Institute (CITI) in January 2024.

To ensure the protection of human subjects, all study participants received and signed an informed consent form (see Appendix C) prior to engagement in the study. The protections outlined in the consent form included the right to withdraw from the study, and to decide if and how their interviews would be recorded. Additionally, participants were informed about the measures that would be taken to anonymize their identities in the published study.

**Data Collection**

For recruitment, a call for study participants email was sent to several relevant listservs (e.g., for student advisors, female staff, identity-based affinity staff groups, etc.) and some individuals at the target institution. The call included an invitation for the recipient to forward the email onto other interested individuals or groups. Individuals who responded to the initial call
were provided more information about the study and invited to fill out an intake survey that collected their background information and availability for an interview.

25 individuals responded to the initial call over a period of approximately 2.5 weeks. 15 individuals from this initial group of respondents filled out the intake survey; two individuals did not fit the study parameters, and eight others did not respond to the follow-up request. Interviews were scheduled with 14 of the 15 individuals who had completed the intake survey; one respondent did not have an interview scheduled because by that point, the study had surpassed its participant recruitment target. Ultimately, 13 interviews were completed; the 14th planned interviewee had to cancel their interview due to a personal emergency and was unable to reschedule.

All interviews took place over a 4-week period in February and March 2024. All interviews were conducted remotely via video or audio call. Each interview was scheduled to be 45-60 minutes, though almost all took the full 60 minutes. Interviews were scheduled at times that participants had indicated they were available (early morning, morning, afternoon, or early evening, and weekday or weekend); they were encouraged to suggest times when they would most likely be able to be mentally present and focus on the interview without distractions.

The study’s methodology was modified in a few ways from the original plan. Firstly, the original intention was to hold all interviews in-person except if interviewees expressed a preference for a remote interview. Since most interviewees preferred this latter option or were flexible, I switched all interviewees to be done remotely for logistical ease and consistency.

The study’s plans also had to be adjusted when participant recruitment yielded much higher interest than expected. The original goal was to recruit about seven individuals, with the hope of eventually conducting about five interviews. Instead, the initial interest was three times
greater than the original target number. Following the advice of my thesis advisor, I still proceeded with conducting all of the interviews that had been scheduled. Then, I considered the goals of the study in order to identify the data subset for detailed data analysis. Although not all collected interviews were included in the study’s detailed data analysis, all 13 interviewees provided valuable information that guided my research process.

Finally, there was more diversity in the group of study participants than originally expected. I had operationalized the characteristics that were pertinent to the study by asking individuals to confirm that they fit all the following characteristics: 1) currently working in a student affairs role, 2) currently working at one of the campuses of the target institution, 3) worked full-time in student affairs for 5 years or fewer in total, 4) identified as a woman of color, and 5) interested in social justice. However, I discovered that people interpreted these criteria in different ways. For example, though I had anticipated finding young professionals who were starting their first full-time jobs and in junior positions, I also received interest from professionals who had had other careers before transitioning to student affairs and/or held more senior positions in their organizations. There was also more variety than expected in the racial/ethnic identities; all self-identified as women of color, but a few additionally identified as multiracial. This range of identities amongst the study participants highlighted the diversity of experiences within the early career WOC community.

**Data Analysis**

I used Zoom’s auto-transcript feature to obtain a transcript for each interview. These transcripts were AI generated and contained numerous errors, so for readability I reformatted and edited the transcripts for each of the 13 collected interviews. The process of cleaning up the transcripts also helped with reviewing the content of each interview. I looked for interviews that
had a high occurrence of topics that were relevant to my research questions and selected two of them for indexing, which is the process of reviewing an interview transcript line-by-line and tagging each line with a brief, factual descriptor of the content.

By reviewing these factual descriptors all together, I identified themes in the data and established 7 of them as initial codes for data analysis. These seven codes were: identity, organizational norms & values, organizational structures & practices, profession, relationships, resources, and social justice. Later, I developed subcodes for identity and relationships, to parse out the different types of identities that interviewees held and different working relationships they maintained.

After identifying my data subset, as described in the preceding section, I uploaded the cleaned up six transcripts and seven codes into the social science coding software Dedoose. I ultimately did not include the two initial interviews that had been used for indexing, as they did not meet the subset selection criteria that I had set.

**Researcher's Background**

In sharing my background, I challenge the fallacy that it is ideal, let alone feasible, for a researcher to be completely unbiased while conducting research. In reality, we are all human and our interpretations of the world are inevitably influenced by our backgrounds and experiences. Additionally, to conduct research about a topic is to engage with it. This engagement is neither inherently good nor bad; having a deep connection to one’s research can lead to insights just as well as biases. In any case, having a personal connection with one’s research topic is unavoidable, but through sharing my background as the researcher conducting this study, I aim to provide transparency about how my positionality may have influenced the research process.
Like everyone, I hold multiple identities. I am Asian American and a woman of color. I am a second-generation American, as both my parents immigrated to the United States as refugees from Vietnam. My brother and I were the first in our direct families to attend university in the United States. I have grown up, studied, and worked in predominantly White spaces for most of my life. I am part of the millennial generation and can remember how different the conversations about social justice, identity, and work/life balance were when I was a college student 15-20 years ago.

With regards to my professional identity, I currently have over 12 years of experience working in student affairs. My current role is the first one in which I am a manager with a director title, although prior to this, I supervised student workers and served as a work lead for several years. An important part of sharing my positionality is to acknowledge my privilege. Although I remember being an early career WOC, I am no longer in an entry-level position, am no longer earning an entry-level salary, and now have the benefits of a graduate education.

In developing my research topic, I was curious about how today’s early career WOC experienced and processed their work. How would it compare to how I approach my work now as a mid-career professional? How would it compare to how I had approached my work as an early career professional?

I gravitated toward this study’s topic for several reasons. Firstly, I wanted to reflect about the experiences that I had had when I was an early career WOC myself. Secondly, although I am no longer in an early stage of my career, I wanted to learn how to support the next generation. I knew that simply having been an early career WOC myself did not mean I would automatically be a good manager to other early career WOC. After all, all adults were once teenagers, yet teenagers still mystify most adults (including me).
This topic is also very personal to me because I remember long eras of having low self-confidence at work. I had also not formally studied student affairs, leadership, or critical theories. Looking back, I feel that I did not have the resources to clearly articulate and address the difficulties I was experiencing. Now, with the help of additional work experience, formal education, and praxis (the learning that comes from being able to apply theory to practice and vice versa), I feel much more capable of navigating my work.

Regarding how my positionality may have affected how I engaged with study participants: at the start of each interview, I introduced myself to interviewees as a fellow WOC and student affairs colleague. Perhaps our shared identities allowed interviewees to feel more comfortable to share their honest experiences with me. That being said, although we were all WOC student affairs professionals, I did not share the same particular backgrounds with any of my interviewees and could not claim to be able to fully understand their lived experiences.

Regarding how my positionality may have affected how I engaged with the data: I may have been more attuned to noticing patterns in the data that echoed things my own experiences. Sometimes this increased sensitivity to patterns can be a strength for data analysis, but it would be an issue if it meant I favored certain findings and ignored other equally salient findings. To counteract this effect, I made sure to also look for patterns in the data that surprised me and did not match my initial expectations.
CHAPTER IV
RESULTS

Overview of Findings

The key findings from the study data were grouped into the following conceptual categories: identity, relationships, organization/institution, and social justice. The concepts of identity and relationships were especially intertwined; they were the most frequently occurring code pairing in the data analysis. Identity, including awareness of their own and others’ identities, was a commonly recurring theme when interviewees spoke about organization/institution and social justice as well.

Identity

Each interviewee had different identities at the top of their minds while navigating their workplaces and leading social justice change efforts. All spoke about their gender and racial/ethnic identities, as well as their professional identities as the youngest, newest, and/or most junior people in their organizations. The identities that some, but not all, interviewees spoke about included their sexuality, disability, education level, socioeconomic status, and having an immigrant family background. Only one interviewee spoke about her religious identity. Oftentimes different identities would be spoken about together; for example, one interviewee spoke about her gender and racial/ethnic identity as a Latina, and other interviewees described themselves as young Asian American women.

Role of Identity in Their Student Affairs Work

Professional Motivation

Almost all interviewees shared how their personal educational experiences and their family upbringing were part of their motivation to work in student affairs. Most shared how the challenging experiences they had had when they were younger made them want to make things
easier for their students now. To explain why she was so dedicated to her student affairs work, Nora said:

I know exactly what it was like to kind of be floating through higher ed and being like, “What is going on? I am on an island.” Nobody really understands how hard it is to be the only person of color in this room of White folks who all had tutors and their parents help them with their college application. And I didn't really have that, and so I'm just really grateful to be able to have a job that allows me to fill that gap.

Nora had felt isolated as a student of color amongst predominantly White and more privileged classmates. The lonely feeling of being a minority in the classroom and not having other peers who shared their experiences was echoed by other interviewees as well.

Several interviewees also recognized that their experiences as marginalized students provided them with valuable skills. Carla spoke about what she had gained from helping her parents navigate social systems as a child and seeing how they were unfairly treated:

If I'm able to gain those skills, I am able to help myself, but also the folks around me in making sure that they have a voice. And help them out with the structure—because it's a White supremacy system. And navigating that, especially if you don't know the language, is kind of hard.

For most interviewees, the themes of identity, professional skills, professional motivation, and empathy were all intertwined. Many had difficulty navigating systems when they were younger due to being marginalized, yet they persevered; today, as staff, they empathized with students who struggled with similar issues and sought to use their hard-won skills to help them.
Workplace Challenges

All interviewees spoke about difficult interactions that they believed or at least suspected were related to their identities, such as people treating them with more disrespect or being more dismissive of their contributions. This differential treatment came from various people in the workplace, including coworkers, supervisors, senior leadership, and, on one occasion, students. Some interviewees were confident that identity was the cause of the differential treatment that they received. More often, interviewees shared suspicions but stopped short of making explicit claims of discrimination.

Most interviewees described numerous encounters with microaggressions related to their identities. For example, the Asian American interviewees shared stories of being repeatedly confused with other Asian American coworkers and being assumed to have meek personalities. Aria further described the stereotypes that she dealt with on a regular basis:

As a young Asian American woman, I'm not really expected to be very assertive . . . I think that also goes with stereotypes about Asian people being quiet, not really being agitators or super radical or political, that they keep their head down, and they're kind of the model minority.

Even if they had not yet experienced a clearly discriminatory incident, some interviewees shared that fear of this happening still occupied their mind. For example, Jessica shared that she had internalized fear about encountering bigoted behavior at work, but acknowledged:

There's nothing that has happened in which it's explicitly like, “Oh, someone is like trying to ‘take advantage of me professionally,’” right? But it's just something that I'm afraid of, just given that I know that this is a thing that Asian American women young professionals deal with.
Jessica and a few other interviewees spoke about staying on guard and acting cautiously because of a persistent expectation of biased treatment at work.

**Identity of Others**

Interviewees frequently spoke about the identities of the others in their workplace. They took note both when they had identities in common with colleagues and students, as well as when their identities contrasted with others.

Most interviewees shared common experiences and backgrounds with the students that they served. For example, Carla shared that, like her students, she had been a member of the low-income, first-generation, and disabled communities; by openly sharing her identities, students of similar backgrounds felt more comfortable connecting with her. Even when interviewees did not share a common identity with their students, they spoke about how their own identities helped them to emphasize with their marginalized students.

When it came to their peers, coworkers, supervisors, and senior leadership, interviewees spoke about similarities as well as differences in identity. Most interviewees spoke about bonding with their peers about their common identities, as they were often also young, women, and/or POC. Interviewees also bonded with peers who had different demographic identities but shared common values, like social justice; interviewees named such individuals as allies.

Having a shared identity with colleagues was often, but not always, a source of optimism. For example, the fact that her organization’s staff and senior leadership were WOC made one interviewee feel hopeful as she started her new job. On the flipside, another interviewee had been disappointed that her supervisor was not supportive of her work, despite being a fellow WOC.

Lastly, interviewees often highlighted differences in identity as they recounted negative workplace experiences, especially with supervisors and senior leadership. Half of the
interviewees critically noted that their supervisors and senior leadership had barely any POC or WOC representation and were in general not as diverse as their entry-level staff or their student populations.

**Relationships**

Interviewees described a variety of relationships that majorly affected their workplace experiences, including peers, students, supervisors, senior leadership, coworkers, mentors, and outside affinity groups. Although these relationship types were not mentioned an equal number of times, all of them were quite salient to the interviewees in different ways. The relationship types could generally be grouped by how positively they were viewed by interviewees. The next section of this chapter will describe those groupings in more detail. Then, the section will further explore principal characteristics of positive and negative relationships.

**Spectrum of Professional Relationships**

At the one end of the spectrum, interviewees described interactions that led to positive associations and feelings, such as trust, optimism, and comfort. At the opposite end of the spectrum, interviewees described interactions that created negative associations and feelings, such as fear, anger, and frustration. No professional relationship type had unanimously negative associations amongst the interviewees, but some had predominantly negative associations. There were also some relationship types that had mixed associations (i.e., different interviewees felt differently about the relationship) or ambivalent associations (i.e., the same interviewee had both positive and negative associations with the relationship).

Relationships with direct peers, mentors, and outside affinity groups were unanimously viewed positively. All interviewees described having peers in their organizations, with the exception of one interviewee whose organization did not have other student affairs staff who
were her equals. Most, but not all, interviewees described having mentors; usually these were external to the interviewee’s organization but in a few cases, interviewees’ supervisors also filled a mentorship role for them. Finally, half of the interviewees spoke about seeking out outside affinity groups such as staff identity groups or identity-focused conferences.

Relationships with students and coworkers were generally viewed positively by most interviewees, with a few exceptions. Views about supervisors were more mixed; three interviewees had positive relationships with their supervisors, but one interviewee had a very negative relationship with her supervisor, and another said that she and her peers had not had trust in their supervisors in a long time. The final interviewee had ambivalent feelings about her supervisor, whom she described as someone meant well but had done things in the past that had made her feel very unsupported.

Finally, half of the interviewees had negative relationships with their organization’s senior leadership. Another interviewee did feel more hopeful about her organization’s new director, but also added that she needed to see more action from the director before she would feel more certain. Only one interviewee described her senior leadership positively without reservations.

**Characteristics of Positive Relationships**

Several recurring themes emerged from how interviewees discussed their positive relationships and why they felt positively about them. These recurring characteristics included collaboration, knowledge sharing, and emotional support. How often these characteristics occurred within a relationship correlated roughly to how positively interviewees felt about the relationship. In general, the positive relationships were supportive and egalitarian, and interviewees did not hesitate to turn to them for help.
**Collaboration**

Interviewees collaborated most closely and most often with their peers. Most described having productive collaborations with coworkers as well. Examples of collaborative activities that interviewees engaged in include working on projects together, having open and honest communication, helping each other problem solve in difficult situations, backing each other up during organizational debates, and advocating for each other.

**Knowledge Sharing**

This category describes the ways in which interviewees and their colleagues shared information with each other. Interviewees engaged in knowledge sharing with many of their positive relationships, especially their peers, supervisors, mentors, and outside affinity groups.

One type of knowledge sharing was giving advice, which could be further divided into two categories: general career advice and advice about how to navigate the workplace. As an example of the latter, Carla spoke about how beneficial it had been for her to begin attending a monthly BIPOC staff group, where individuals from a variety of levels and positions in her institution shared experiences of working in a predominantly White university:

> A lot of these folks have been in [this institution] for like 20 years, and…it’s been really helpful as a newer staff member, listening to the experience of how to navigate, how to advocate for yourself. And they tell their stories and the injustice that's happening in their own work experience.

Another type of knowledge sharing was comparing notes about shared workplace experiences. Several interviewees described how they would debrief with their peers about the various difficult situations that they had experienced; it helped that oftentimes their peers had also experienced or witnessed the same incidents.
**Emotional Support**

Validation was an especially important feature of peer relationships, but it also occurred in positive supervisor and mentor relationships. Several interviewees described turning to these relationships to get confirmation that their concerns were legitimate. Getting this confirmation helped to alleviate their anxieties that they were somehow incorrect in what they had experienced, felt, or thought. Nora described how peer validation had provided much-needed inner peace regarding a troubling experience with her supervisor:

My biggest form of agency at that period in my work was going to the colleagues that I trusted and just saying things like, “Hey, I feel really upset about this thing that happened. . . . Do you think that I'm in the wrong or out of line to be upset about these things that happened?” And pretty unanimously, my coworkers agreed with me, and that was at the time enough validation for me.

Nora continued on to explain that this validation was especially important to her because she felt limited in other ways that she could respond to the situation. Similarly, Mia shared that getting validation from her positive relationships made up for the negativity that she received from another unsupportive colleague. In recalling this experience and imagining the advice that she might give to her younger self, she said:

If you don't get feedback from this specific person, it's not the end of the world. I feel like you get feedback already from your coworkers and your manager. I think that's enough. Cause I was definitely kind of like, “Oh, I wish I got feedback from this one person.” But now I'm like, it's fine. My students are telling me that they feel welcomed by me and they tell me that they love interacting with me on a day-to-day basis. My coworkers think I have good ideas. I think that's enough for me.
Having shared identities with their positive relationships was a common source of comfort for interviewees; interviewees felt that such individuals could more easily understand their experiences and offer empathy. Many interviewees also observed that their own identities could in turn provide a source of comfort and trust for their students. For example, one interviewee surmised that she was more approachable to students because she appeared closer in age to her students than her colleagues did.

Having a safe space and a community to process complicated experiences was another valuable form of emotional support from positive relationships; interviewees spoke about how they felt very close to her peers because they were not only experiencing the same things at work, but also could process those experiences together.

Lastly, another feature of emotionally supportive relationships was that interviewees felt comfortable sharing their identities and being their authentic selves. One interviewee shared how she enjoyed sometimes speaking in Spanish with her Latina peers and students, and another said that she felt that her peers and coworkers were very kind when she shared her disability.

**Characteristics of Negative Relationships**

The recurring themes from the negative relationships were in many ways a reverse of the themes from the positive relationships; they were often characterized by a lack of collaboration and communication, lack of shared understanding, and differential treatment.

**Lack of Collaboration**

For some interviewees, the ability to collaborate was impeded by structural or operational issues, like separated physical offices or prolonged hiring processes. One interviewee noted that her organization had been trying permanently fill their several supervisor and senior leadership roles for some time, which meant that the individuals who had recently rotated through the
interim leadership positions did not stay long enough to build meaningful working relationships with their staff.

In addition to these structural issues, interviewees also dealt with unsupportive colleagues who were disinterested in collaboration or even took actions to obstruct their work. These colleagues would usually not openly state their views; instead, they found various and more subtle way to communicate their opinions. For example, although Mia’s coworker did not outright state her disapproval of her, she would often critique her ideas more harshly than she would critique others.

**Lack of Shared Understanding**

When interviewees could not connect with their colleagues over shared identities, values, or experiences, it decreased the amount of shared understanding between them. They felt more guarded around such colleagues and did not always feel comfortable expressing their honest opinions around them.

Several interviewees spoke about how many of their colleagues, especially senior leadership, often did not share the same identities as their students and front-line staff, including themselves. They connected this with a general sentiment that their leadership was disconnected from the staff and students with marginalized identities and seemed to have difficulty empathizing with them.

A lack of shared values was another source of division between interviewees and some of their work relationships. Namely, several interviewees spoke about having demoralizing or frustrating experiences with colleagues or students who did not seem approach their work with as much of a social justice emphasis as they did. When it came to senior leadership, they expressed
a lack of faith that leadership would make decisions that prioritized social justice, based on their ignorance of or resistance to DEI.

Lastly, while interviewees spoke about shared work experiences and efforts being a source of bonding, the converse was also true; when they noticed that their colleagues did not share their same work ethic or workload, it built resentment.

**Differential Treatment**

All interviewees described the ways that they had experienced differential treatment at work. In some cases, the differential treatment was positive, as described earlier in this chapter on how students would seek out interviewees because of their shared identities.

However, more often the differential treatment was negative; interviewees reported being more frequently and severely disrespected, underpaid, and overworked in comparison to their White, male, and/or more senior colleagues. For example, one interviewee noticed that one of her male peers received more ample praise from their supervisors, even though he was younger and had less student affairs education and work experience than his female peers. This biased treatment mostly came from colleagues, including coworkers, supervisors, and senior leadership. As mentioned earlier, some interviewees sensed that their colleagues’ treatment was unfair, but were unable or unwilling to explicitly label it as discrimination.

Interviewees were aware that they needed to behave in certain ways to get better treatment from colleagues. They spoke about needing to come to meetings extra prepared with data and ready to respond to pushback from certain colleagues. Some lamented how much this scrutiny contrasted with the experience of their non-WOC colleagues, who seemed to more readily expect and receive credibility.
All interviewees were very aware of being new and inexperienced at work, in comparison to their colleagues. Their hyperawareness about their junior standings in their career and organizations affected how they approached their work.

**Effect on Self-Confidence**

Most interviewees specifically named imposter syndrome to describe the feelings they had had—or were still having—about their work. Their self-consciousness made them worry about the value of their workplace contributions. Nora described how much her imposter syndrome weighed on her when she first started in her role:

> I constantly was worried that people didn't think I was good enough to do my job, that I didn't know how to do my job, that I was too young, I had no idea what I was doing… I was just trying to draw as little attention to myself as possible.

Nora and some interviewees said that their sense of imposter syndrome had lessened as they gained more experience in their roles, but other interviewees spoke about their uncertainty and self-doubt in the present tense. Some interviewees also noted that they seemed to struggle more with self-confidence in comparison with their White or male coworkers.

**Effect on Behavior**

Interviewees’ awareness about their lack of seniority also affected their workplace behavior. When they encountered problematic conduct, most chose not to confront the instigators directly. One interviewee felt that the issue was beyond what she in her junior role had the capacity to address; instead, she deferred to her supervisor and more senior coworkers to directly address the issue.
Other interviewees did not respond directly because they were worried about the repercussions. For example, Mia did not openly address an antagonistic coworker because she was worried that doing so could jeopardize her chances of being hired for a permanent position at her institution. Although her mentor had advised her to confront her coworker, she ultimately decided:

“I can't, this person is really scary in the terms of like—they have a lot of connections.”

And the way that my manager worded it is, if I were to give them feedback right now, and I'm looking to work at the university, and they find out—they could easily tell that department to not hire me because of my character.

Putting up boundaries was another activity that interviewees struggled with. Carla shared that she felt fear when imagining say no to her supervisor:

That's the biggest fear I have is, if I say no, how is that gonna look career-wise? But then I see my White allies and my white coworkers are like, “No, I can't do it”—and nothing happens. But it's that fear that stops me.

Jessica shared that she struggled with the assumptions that people might have about her because of her status as a female early career professional:

As a new professional…people might assume that you're more open to saying yes to things, right? … if you say no, then it's different than if you are a man saying no, right? So then I haven't found the right balance; I'm still trying to learn the right balance of being able to very professionally and kindly, with grace, be able to establish clear boundaries.
In reflecting about their struggles with maintaining boundaries and saying no at work, Jessica and Carla observed that their colleagues who had more privileged identities did not seem to struggle as much with these matters.

**Workload and Compensation**

As mentioned earlier, interviewees shared examples of colleagues treating them in a biased manner. Sometimes these biased actions, especially when perpetrated by supervisors or senior leadership, went beyond interpersonal interactions and had tangible impacts on interviewees’ work assignments, financial compensation, or hiring opportunities.

Interviewees noted that their non-POC and non-female colleagues received more professional opportunities and support, such as pay raises and lighter workloads. In comparison, interviewees felt overworked, underpaid, and unappreciated by their organizations and leadership, which had negative impacts on their quality of life and morale. This was a sensitive topic area to several interviewees; one person cried while sharing her frustrations and another did not want to be recorded while speaking about the challenges arising from her low pay.

**Organizational Operations**

Interviewees spoke about leadership decisions that were usually made without their input but impacted their work in significant ways. This was especially challenging given that their senior leadership seemed to often develop policies that harmed vulnerable students and staff.

Half of the interviewees also referenced staffing issues that impacted their work experience, both directly and indirectly. These included staff and leadership positions that remained unfilled for long periods of time, thus creating a chronic understaffing issue. When reflecting about the hiring process for these unfilled positions, some interviewees said their senior leadership seemed to favor candidates who would uphold the status quo rather than
challenge it. For example, Hope observed that senior leadership tended to hire individuals who shared their values and backgrounds, which were more conservative and business-driven:

> I do think that a lot of times people do like to promote who is similar to them. And they like to promote people who will preserve the status quo, frankly. And I think that if you are a minority in multiple ways and then on top of that, you are a low-level employee or an early career employee, you know, presumably you're not very high up in the organization. And then, on top of that, you're in a student-facing role…there's layers, and I think each individual layer is not necessarily such an obstacle, but when you kind of compound them, then you've got this pile of layers that can be hard to penetrate through.

Although Hope was interested in leadership roles, she also sensed that individuals like her, who were more progressive and student-driven, advocated for social justice, and had a variety of marginalized identities, would encounter multiple institutionalized obstacles to advancement.

**Social Justice**

**Conceptions of Social Justice**

All interviewees viewed social justice as a deeply personal core value. When they were asked to share what social justice meant to them, most spoke about creating environments in which everyone, regardless of their identities, could thrive. They believed that it was important to advocate for and support individuals and groups who were often marginalized in society because of their identities. This support included ensuring that marginalized individuals had equitable access to resources, were not discriminated against, and had their voices uplifted. A few interviewees also included fighting for systematic change in their social justice definitions; they believed that it was important to break down the institutional and societal conditions that contributed to social injustices.
When they were asked to share situations in their organizations that they felt were a social justice issue, half of the interviewees described situations that primarily impacted their students; the other half spoke about situations that impacted staff working conditions. One of the interviewees who described an issue affecting her work also clarified that she did not consider it to be a social justice issue. Another interviewee spoke first about her student-facing social justice work and later shared the challenges she had had as a staff member, but she did not explicitly label the latter as social justice issues.

Additionally, although all interviewees felt committed to upholding social justice values through their professional work, some minimized their individual contributions. One interviewee felt imposter syndrome when she compared her efforts to others’ in her institution. Two others said they felt their efforts were not that much in the greater scheme of things, since they hadn’t been able to change things at an institutional level.

**Obstacles to Social Justice Change Efforts**

All interviewees faced challenges when attempting to address the social justice issues they had encountered. Many of the challenges, such as low self-confidence, problematic coworkers, and disconnected senior leadership, have also been discussed in earlier sections of this chapter as general challenges in workplace experiences and relationships. The following sections will review these challenges in more detail, with a focus on how they affected interviewees’ social justice change efforts.

**Interpersonal Obstacles**

This section reviews the obstacles created by colleagues who were unsupportive of interviewees’ social justice change efforts. Sometimes they did not seem to understand or care
about DEI values and/or obstructed interviewees’ efforts. Nora shared how her coworkers found subtle ways to discourage her from bringing up DEI matters in their organization:

You're not necessarily having someone say outright, “I think it's stupid to address this.” … it's more so if I'm bringing it up in a meeting, or if I am suggesting it, or we are doing a training where that's the focus, some of my colleagues find a way to delegitimize whatever it is that's being discussed or find a way to minimize or brush off whatever is being discussed, to write it off… So I just kind of went through a period where I was like, “Oh, well, I'm never gonna say anything”…because I was like, anything I say is gonna be shut down or written off.

Nora described how her colleagues’ behavior not only inhibited her current activities; they also discouraged her from making future attempts to work on DEI.

**Organizational Obstacles**

As discussed earlier, several interviewees lamented about how removed they were from organizational decision-making and how constrained they were in their individual social justice efforts. Hope analyzed the limited agency that she had in her organization by reflecting:

It's hierarchy we're subject to. It's power, structure, organization, whatever, by definition, right? We are only as powerful as we've been assigned to be as much as we've been vested with, and we're vested with less power when we're beneath people. That's just what a hierarchy is…it's ironic that you know we declare that our values are equality and justice and all of these things. But when you look at this kind of work organization, there's nothing democratic.

Hope and other interviewees felt that it was futile to challenge their senior leadership’s decisions, given their organizations’ rigid hierarchies and their junior positions in their organizations.
After describing her organization’s hierarchy, Hope continued on to speak about the substantial role that her senior leadership had for setting the tone, priorities, and values for their organization:

At our organization, it's like, if our Dean says no, then it's no…if your upper leadership doesn't support what you're doing, I mean, how radical can you get? How much action can you really take without the approval of people who are by definition more powerful than you and have power over what you do?

Although the senior leadership at Hope’s organization had the power to make social justice a priority, he did not seem interested in doing so; she felt that his lack of support trickled down to stifle DEI efforts across the whole organization.

**Strategies and Tactics**

Interviewees described various tools for addressing social justice issues in their organizations and overcoming the various obstacles they encountered in the course of their efforts. The following sections of this chapter describe their major strategies and supporting tactics in more detail. The strategies are ordered roughly in the order of how often they were utilized by interviewees. There was some variation in interviewees’ opinions of some of the strategies and tactics, such as which were the most effective.

**Working Together**

The strategy of collaboration was very important to all interviewees. Every interviewee sought advice from their positive relationships regarding the social justice issues they faced. Peers and mentors were the most frequently sought after relationships for this type of support, and to a lesser extent supervisors and outside affinity groups were also consulted.
After encountering a social justice issue, interviewees would typically talk to trusted individuals to get validation that what they had experienced was indeed problematic. They would also compare their own experiences with their peers. Next, they would engage in problem-solving discussions that included advice-giving, strategizing, and coordinating a response. Aria spoke about how having a community of peers who cared about social justice was heartening:

Being surrounded by so many students of color and staff of color, sometimes I feel like the responsibility is lifted a little bit from me. Like, I'm just one of so many, so I don't see myself as I have to be doing this every day, day in and day out, which is nice. I don't think that's sustainable to feel like you're the only one holding things up or moving things forward.

Getting support from like-minded colleagues was extremely helpful for interviewees’ social justice efforts, from both practical and morale-boosting standpoints.

**Drawing on Their Own Experiences**

Multiple interviewees spoke about they honed their student affairs skills, especially for engaging students from marginalized communities, through their own lived experiences. Hope described how her experiences as a marginalized person gave her a strong sense of empathy:

I understand what it's like to navigate these identities that are not straightforward or not the majority…[it’s] something a person has to work through as a minority, to find their self-esteem, to find their place, to find their sense of belonging. So I think people who've had to work through things like that—yeah, we definitely have advantages, in our ability to empathize in our ability to put ourselves in other people's shoes and really address their needs.
Several interviewees also contrasted their personal experiences and empathy skills with those of colleagues with different identities; they felt that their more privileged colleagues seemed more likely to overlook student needs that they could not personally identify with.

**Increasing Knowledge**

The majority of interviewees spoke about the intentional steps they took to continue their learning and to be better equipped to address social justice challenges. Some interviewees learned tactics from mentors and outside affinity groups. For other interviewees, this preparation came in the form of attending training, workshops, and conferences focused on identity, DEI, or leadership. One interviewee said these activities were especially helpful to her as she considered stepping into leadership roles in the future and becoming the kind of leader she wanted to see—one who supported social justice in an authentic way. The extra knowledge that they obtained gave interviewees more confidence in addressing social justice issues. The extra credentials also provided a shield against skeptical colleagues who were critical of their work.

Additionally, several interviewees were engaged in leading DEI trainings for other members of their organizations. The target audiences for these trainings varied and included students, student workers, peers, and coworkers. A few other interviewees wished that they could design and offer such trainings at their organizations but felt that it would be impossible to do so because of their lack of authority or a lack of organizational support for such an effort.

**Working Within Sphere of Influence**

When it came to taking direct action, many interviewees took an act first and ask permission later (or never) approach. Their self-directed activities were low-profile; they found opportunities to make a change within their areas of responsibility. For example, one interviewee said that she and her peers decided to launch a social media campaign about social justice
because they knew that it could be implemented without needing to go through layers of approval from senior leadership.

**Speaking Up**

All interviewees did not hesitate to turn to their trusted relationships for advice, especially peers and mentors. In a few cases, interviewees learned that by voicing their concerns to sympathetic supervisors or senior leadership, they were able to call more attention to issues that others in their organizations had also noticed.

On the other hand, most interviewees did not voice their disagreement directly with the perpetrators of the social justice issue, and instead chose indirect options that they felt were more prudent, given their junior standings. Only one interviewee opted to share her opinions directly with the relevant individual; Hope spoke to the senior leadership of her organization to advocate for better staff working conditions. In reflecting about how she felt during the conversation, she said:

I was on some level maybe a little bit intimidated to say those things to him, or hesitant, just cause I'm basically the lowest level speaking to someone at the highest level—so it literally doesn't get more power disparate than that.

Hope continued on to say that although she was intimidated by the thought of speaking up, her convictions about social justice bolstered her courage.

**Summary of Findings**

This chapter reviewed findings from the data in four main categories: identity, relationships, organization/institution, and social justice. Each of these categories was a topic that was salient to interviewees during their early career experiences and pursuits of social justice change.
Interviewees spoke about how their identities influenced their professional motivations and workplace challenges. While their gender, racial/ethnic, and professional identities were the most frequently mentioned, interviewees shared a variety of other demographic and social identities that were also salient to them. The identities of their students and colleagues were also frequently mentioned as important factors in their workplace experiences. Additionally, interviewees spoke frequently about their workplace relationships, including students, peers, supervisors, senior leadership, coworkers, mentors, and outside affinity groups. These relationships could generally be arranged along a spectrum of positive to negative; certain characteristics were strongly associated with positive relationships while others were strongly associated with negative relationships.

Next, the chapter reviewed how interviewees thought of the organizations and institution in which they worked, including their own standing within the organization/institution, workplace behaviors, workload and compensation, and organizational operations. Finally, the chapter reviewed how interviewees defined social justice and incorporated it as a value in their professional lives. Interviewees encountered various obstacles, both interpersonal and organizational, to their social justice change efforts. In response, they developed various strategies and tactics to address the social justice challenges in their workplaces.

The four categories of findings often overlapped; for example, interviewees often spoke about their identity in relation to their relationships, organization/institution, and social justice efforts. Themes often also recurred across different categories; for example, interviewees spoke about their lack of self-confidence in putting up boundaries as well as in directly confronting colleagues exhibiting problematic behavior. The next chapter of this study will discuss these overlapping and recurring themes, and their significance, in more detail.
CHAPTER V
DISCUSSION, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

Introduction

This final chapter discusses how the study’s findings provide insight into its three guiding research questions:

1. How do early career WOC perceive the power dynamics that they encounter while pursuing social justice change in their organizations?
2. What strategies and tactics do they utilize to lead change efforts?
3. What aspects of their identities are the most salient to them during their change efforts?

The findings suggest that the concepts of identity, relationships, organization, institution, and power are inextricably intertwined in the work experiences of early career WOC. Although many of the findings were not specifically focused on social justice, they provide valuable context for how the interviewees engaged in social justice change. The ways in which interviewees generally navigated their organizations, experienced their work, and made choices are important for understanding how they navigated social justice change, experienced the process, and chose their change strategies and tactics.

Discussion

The following discussion of the study’s findings are organized into three sections, one for each of the three research questions.

How do early career WOC perceive the power dynamics that they encounter while pursuing social justice change in their organizations?

*Power Dynamics Through an Intersectional Lens*

The study found evidence suggesting that early career WOC experienced workplace challenges in a unique and often intensified way, as compared with colleagues who were White,
male, and/or more senior. These results echo the research on the experiences of WOC professionals, as well as research on the challenges faced by early career professionals and grassroots organizational change leaders (Espino & Ariza, 2022; Hollis, 2014; Kezar, 2011; Sánchez et al., 2021). The findings suggest that individuals who are a part of all of these groups are especially vulnerable to disempowerment; an intersectional analysis can further explain that this is because of the concurrently occurring disempowerment that they endure as early career professionals, women of color, and social justice advocates.

Interviewees described how they received differential treatment even when compared with colleagues who shared some their identities; for example, one interviewee noticed that her male peer would get more praise and support than the women on their team, even though they were all early career professionals. This finding aligns with prior research that has identified that, even within a group of with a shared identities, the individuals with less identity-based privilege will be more vulnerable to disempowering treatment (Kezar, 2011).

Social justice was a deeply important and personal value to interviewees; their social justice beliefs were shaped by their personal background. Viewing “social justice advocate” as another identity important to the interviewees and incorporating it into the study’s intersectional analysis allows for an even deeper understanding of their workplace experiences. The findings suggest that early career WOC may be personally inclined to be interested in social justice, yet are also more inclined to face both identity-based and activity-based obstacles to their social justice change efforts. When they encountered opposition, it was hard for interviewees to determine whether it was due to their identity or the nature of their efforts, or both. The reality, from an intersectional perspective, is that it was a mix of both, and the intersection of their identities and activities incited especially strong opposition.
Awareness and Articulation of Disempowerment

When describing the impacts of organizational power dynamics on their work experiences, only one interviewee used terms like hierarchy and power dynamics explicitly. However, though most interviewees did not use this terminology to describe what they were experiencing, all of them still shared stories of navigating disempowerment. The difficulties that they faced reflects the prior research on the forms of disempowerment encountered by grassroots organizers as well as the challenges encountered by early career professionals (Espino & Ariza, 2022; Kezar, 2011; Sánchez et al., 2021).

The interviewees’ junior organizational and social standings as early career WOC were often on their minds when they deliberated on how to respond to workplace challenges. Prior research has indicated individuals can face negative consequences when confronting colleagues with more power than them, and these consequences were more severe for individuals with marginalized identities (Espino & Ariza, 2022; Hollis, 2014; Kezar, 2011). The findings of this study augments earlier research by showing that early career WOC are very cognizant of these dynamics and it influences their decision-making and behaviors.

The study’s findings also suggest additional nuance to prior research about challenge and support for early career professionals, which has indicated that they desired challenging experiences as beneficial opportunities for growth (Dinise-Halter, 2017). Interviewees spoke about their challenging experiences and appreciation for what they learned from these challenges. However, none of the interviewees in this study expressed interest in having additional challenging experiences. Unlike the mostly White interviewees in Dinise-Halter’s study, the interviewees of this study did not feel the need to seek out more challenges because,
due to their positionalities as early career WOC, the nature of their work was inherently challenging enough.

**Effects of Disempowerment**

Disempowerment was associated with a variety of negative material, cognitive, emotional, and behavioral impacts in the findings. Interviewees experienced the full range of disempowering tactics that were identified by Kezar (2011) in prior research, from subtle ones like microaggressions to the more overt ones like silencing. Even when their colleagues did not overtly deploy these tactics, interviewees still acknowledged their looming threat. The findings suggest that the effects of disempowerment can become internalized; these findings support prior research about the debilitating cognitive effects of disempowerment (Kezar, 2011; Lee, 2022).

Interviewees shared different negative thoughts and feelings related to their work, including imposter syndrome, self-doubt, fear, intimidation, and frustration. It was notable that almost all interviewees spoke about feeling intimidated by or afraid of something or someone at work. Prior research has shown that other early career professionals also have stress about work (Renn & Hodges, 2007; Sánchez et al., 2021). However, though it may be common to have work-related worries, it is more concerning if the worries are intense enough to become internalized, debilitating, or fear-based emotions. The usual amount of worry that early career professionals have about their work might be intensified for those who feel especially defenseless due to their marginalized identities.

Interviewees spoke about having inadequate access to organizational resources, including staffing support, compensation and benefits, and promotion opportunities. Having access to tangible resources provides a form of power; thus, an inequitable allocation of resources becomes disempowering. This finding was aligned with prior research about social change
leaders, especially those who were POC, receiving insufficient organizational support for their work (Espino & Ariza, 2022).

Some interviewees also shared that job promotion opportunities in their organizations seemed to be limited to individuals who would preserve the status quo rather than question socially unjust practices. This finding supported prior research on how organizations, especially structuralist and mechanistic ones, are resistant to change and tend to perpetuate existing power structures (Acker, 2006; Olson et al., 2023).

To illustrate the importance of an intersectional framework, Crenshaw (1989) described of how Black women suffered from legal decisions that viewed them as only women or only Black people, without considering the impacts of the intersectionality of their gender and race. Similarly, a few interviewees described how their organizations had one-size-fits-all policies that applied to all students or staff, which ended up favoring the students and staff who had more privilege. Because the policies were designed with a more privileged audience in mind, their prescribed rules and penalties were more difficult for less privileged individuals to surmount.

Prior research has also indicated that institutions prioritized privileged groups in their policies, decision-making, and resource allocation, thus further marginalizing those already marginalized in the institution (Acker, 2006; Olson et al., 2023). This study adds to the existing research by showing how early career WOC experience these acts of marginalization. In some cases, they were the direct victims (for staff policies) or the unwilling enforcers (for student policies); in all cases, the interviewees were cognizant about and critical of the inequities of the situation.

**What strategies and tactics do early career WOC utilize to lead change efforts?**

Intersectionality theory describes how individuals with multiple marginalized identities are differently and often more severely impacted by systematic oppression. This framework
helps to explain why the study’s interviewees contended with obstacles during their social justice change efforts that their more privileged colleagues did not.

This study’s findings suggest that early career WOC are aware of the additional challenges that they face and develop unique strategies to surmount them. In other words, while they encounter obstacles that are linked to their identities, they also devise solutions that are linked to their identities as well. Because interviewees held little power via their position in the organization, they creatively found other forms of power. For example, when they had trouble getting their supervisors and senior leadership to support their efforts, interviewees instead turned to their peers for help.

The study’s findings generally align with the strategies and tactics presented in the literature review as resources for organizational change and for navigating the early career work experience, but there are some additions that were not emphasized in the literature review. Amendments to the original list of strategies and tactics are discussed below and reflect interviewees’ adaptations to the unique challenges and advantages that they had as early career WOC.

**Education**

Interviewees proactively sought ways to increase their knowledge and become more effective in their work, e.g., by attending optional trainings and conferences. This aligns with prior research on how early career professionals often learn about student affairs through on-the-job learning rather than formal education (Dinise-Halter, 2017; Renn & Hodges, 2007). The study also extends prior research by identifying an additional valuable source of knowledge: lived experiences. Interviewees often connected their own experiences as students to their student affairs work, but most of the time they did not discuss what they had studied; instead,
they spoke about how they had learned to successfully navigate systems and applied that knowledge to help marginalized students at work. Thus, the findings broaden the definition of education that had been provided in the literature review; instead of only relying on knowledge gained through a formal faculty-designed curriculum, the early career WOC also draw upon knowledge gained through their parents, peers, and lived experiences.

Prior research has already indicated that formal education does not adequately prepare early career professionals for their work. The gulf between formal education and practice may be especially wide for early career WOC, because the curricula and institutions are not designed for individuals with their identities. Upon finding their formal educations lacking, the findings suggest that early career WOC turn to other sources of knowledge that are more relevant to the challenges and opportunities that they face. This includes drawing upon lived experiences as well as consulting with peers, supervisors, and mentors with similar backgrounds who can share more relatable advice.

**Relationships**

Prior research has indicated relationships and coalition building as resources that early career professionals and change leaders utilize for navigating their work (Kezar et al., 2011; Renn & Hodges, 2007). This study’s findings adds to the prior research by indicating that peer relationships in particular were among the strongest resources to early career WOC working on social justice change, as indicated by the frequency with which interviewees turned to these relationships for support, how positively they viewed them, and the many benefits that interviewees gained from them.

The relationships that were viewed in an unanimously positive light by interviewees were their peers, mentors, and outside affinity groups. It was notable that interviewees thought so
highly of their peer relationships, just as much as their mentor and outside affinity group relationships. After all, interviewees proactively sought out and maintained relationships with the latter groups, whereas their peers were merely people who had coincidentally been hired around the same time and place. However, despite being somewhat randomly placed with their peers, interviewees developed very strong bonds with them.

An intersectional lens can help to explain the nature of these strong peer relationships. Firstly, the type of individuals seeking to work in an entry-level student affairs role would not be entirely random; there would be some likelihood of common values and identities. Secondly, due to sharing similar roles and responsibilities, interviewees interacted frequently with their peers and shared common experiences. The combination of their shared values, identities, and work experiences meant that interviewees’ peers could understand the unique nature of their experiences better than anyone, including their mentors and outside affinity groups. Peers can provide a special type of support to early career WOC when they need a trusted source of validation, understanding, or practical advice that is closely tailored to their situation.

Peer relationships may also provide a safe space for early career WOC because, with everyone sharing the same position in the organizational hierarchy and often some of the same identities, there is less of a power imbalance between individuals (Hollis, 2014; Lee, 2022). With fewer power dynamics and threat of disempowering forces, peer relationships can allow early career WOC to feel more comfortable letting down their guard.

Finally, it is interesting to note that the findings about the characteristics of positive work relationships overlapped significantly with the strategies and tools that interviewees used for social justice change. This correlation suggests that strong relationships and social justice efforts are highly connected from the perspective of early career WOC who are social justice leaders.
For this group, it is perhaps especially important to have strong, positive relationships as the foundation for successful social justice efforts; conversely, having shared values can build the foundation for a positive working relationship.

**Self-Confidence**

Interviewees spoke about how their confidence at work had generally increased as they gained more work experience. However, to get to this point, most had struggled through deep-seated feelings of self-doubt, imposter syndrome, and fear. The findings indicate that in addition to external challenges at work, early career WOC also struggle with powerful internalized challenges. This supports prior research about the insidious effects of disempowerment on how individuals perceive their situations (Jo & Park, 2016; Kezar, 2011).

The study also suggests how early career WOC overcome these internalized challenges and strengthened their sense of agency and self-efficacy. The resources that interviewees use to increase their self-confidence—including gaining more work experience, seeking out supplementary learning opportunities, and leaning on strong relationships—generally echo prior research about the learning and growth of early career professionals in their first year of work (Renn & Hodges, 2007).

Although relationships as a support system for early career professionals had been identified in prior research, this study provides more detail about how relationships are particularly important early career WOC as they build their self-confidence. Getting validation from trusted colleagues often helped the study’s interviewees mitigate confidence-shaking interactions from antagonistic colleagues. The validation did not need to come from someone with more experience or organizational power, like a supervisor or senior leadership; their peers were an important source of validation as well. Mainly, it appears to be important that the
validation comes from someone who the early career WOC feels positive about and can identify with. By seeking out positive affirmations from individuals who share common identities with them, they can feel more confidence that the other party will readily understand and believe their intersectional experiences, without having to provide further details or justifications.

This study also provides further nuance about factors that build or detract from early career WOC’s confidence levels; this level of details had not been as apparent in prior research. For example, while the early career professionals in Renn and Hodges’ (2007) study had been anxious about how their students would perceive them, the interviewees in this study were overall confident about their ability to connect with their students. This may have been because they identified closely with their students and vice versa. Instead, interviewees mostly expressed nervousness about engaging with colleagues who were different from them in terms of seniority or personal identity—or oftentimes both. Unlike their easy bond with their students, the interviewees were unable to understand their more senior and privileged individuals and vice versa, and this contributed to their workplace anxieties. These findings again suggest that for early career WOC, having colleagues—whether peers, coworkers, supervisors, or senior leadership—who understand their experiences can bolster their confidence.

Finally, the study findings indicate a strong association between self-advocacy and social justice advocacy; as interviewees grew more self-confident, they also became more confident social justice change leaders, and vice versa. Because the intersectionality of their identities, early career WOC social justice change leaders often identify both personally and professionally with the goals of their social justice efforts. Thus, there may be a large degree of overlap between advocating for themselves and advocating for marginalized groups; success in one area can also feel for them like success in the other area.
**Political Savvy**

This study’s findings largely support prior research about how early career professionals and social change leaders navigate their work. Interviewees were highly aware about their positionality as relatively powerless individuals in their organizations and adjusted their behavior accordingly. Prior research has also shown that early career professionals and social justice change leaders became more successful at navigating their work when they were cognizant about and adapted to the power dynamics that affected them (Duran et al., 2022). Although political savvy is an important skill for all professionals to develop, the findings of this study suggest that it is especially important skill for early career WOC to master. Given their positions of low privilege and organizational power, the interviewees found alternative ways to have influence, such as operating within their spheres of influence and also working with collaborators/coalitions (Duran et al., 2022; Kezar et al., 2011).

The study’s findings also echo prior research that showed that an increased sense of political savvy did not always imply an increased sense of empowerment; sometimes, being politically savvy meant suppressing their true opinions in the name of a pragmatic goal or performing in a certain way that they knew their more privileged colleagues did not need to. Like early career WOC in prior research, interviewees also felt constrained on the ways that they could or should respond to problematic situations (Sánchez et al., 2021).

**Change Process Models**

Several change process models were discussed in the literature review, including the Kotter Change Model (Kang et al., 2022). However, when describing their approaches to their social justice change work, no interviewees referenced any formal change models or theories of change. Instead, they spoke about how they had learned how to navigate their work through on-
the-job learning and their lived experiences. Additionally, although some of the practices used by interviewees correlated with steps in the Kotter Change Model in general, the model does not accurately describe the way that interviewees approached their social change work.

The change process that interviewees described was more driven by intuition and did not adhere to a specific stepped plan or timeline; their practices were more aligned with the iterative and nonlinear version of the Kotter Change Model that was implemented by Kang et al. (2022). Also, although the Kotter Change Model does address communication and collaboration, these practices are not the focal point of the model; in contrast, communication and collaboration with their strong relationships was a core part of the change process for interviewees.

The Kotter Change Model also does not address the deeply felt emotions that interviewees had about their change efforts, nor did it preview the identity-based challenges that interviewees encountered during the course of their work. This study’s findings indicate that a change model developed by or for early career WOC student affairs would differ significantly from traditional business school change models like the Kotter Change Model.

**What aspects of their identities are the most salient to early career WOC during their change efforts?**

*Self-Identification*

The interviewees of this study each shared multiple identities that were salient to their work experience. It was unsurprising that all interviewees spoke about their gender, racial/ethnic, and professional identities, given that these were highlighted in the call for study participants. However, each interviewee also shared various other identities that were important to them, showing how much diversity there can be even in a group who were all early career WOC. Additionally, different interviewees focused on different aspects of their identities, indicating
that identities are dynamic and the ones that are most salient in a given situation will change. The fact that interviewees navigated their work as social justice advocates, in addition to being early career WOC, also made a significant impact on their workplace experiences.

Interviewees often spoke about their different identities together; it was difficult for them to parse whether something that they had experienced was due to their race/ethnicity, gender, professional standing, or another factor. This finding was aligns with prior research on early career WOC, who also viewed their identities as interconnected (Sánchez et al., 2021). That said, most prior studies about early career professionals did not use an intersectional framework and the nuances that study participants may felt about their various identities were not captured.

One finding that differed from prior research on early career WOC was that, for the most part, the interviewees in this study did not feel pressured into hiding their identities at work (Sánchez et al., 2021). Although some interviewees expressed concern that they were being treated with prejudice due to their identities, they remained committed to expressing themselves, as a way to be true to themselves and support students who shared their identities. This indicates that the interviewees of this study perhaps found a slightly better institutional fit for themselves than the interviewees of past studies.

**Identity in Relation to Others**

This study provides more details about the nature of relationships that appear important to early career WOC. The findings indicated that identity is a salient factor in both positive and negative work relationships for early career WOC; interviewees were keenly aware of the identities of others in their organizations and how they were similar to or contrasted with their own identities. Interviewees built strong relationships with their students and peers thanks to their shared identities; conversely, not having many shared identities contributed to the wide gulf
that interviewees felt between themselves and senior leadership. Past studies have shown that relationships are important to early career professionals; these findings suggest that the intersection of relationships and identity is especially important to early career WOC (Renn & Hodges, 2007).

Interviewees also noticed that their colleagues who shared some but not all of the same identities as them (e.g., senior level WOC or White early career professional) did not experience workplace challenges in the same way that they did; their observations align with an intersectional analysis that acknowledges the uniqueness intersectionality of their identities as not just WOC, but early career WOC.

**Identity as a Source of Strength**

Crenshaw’s original paper introducing intersectionality emphasized that an individual’s various marginalized identities were an important factor in their experience of oppression (Crenshaw, 1989). However, the findings throughout this study indicated that identities can be important factor in early career WOC’s empowering and positive experiences as well, including in the close relationships that they form, the self-confidence that they build, and the social justice efforts that they lead. These findings contrast with the prior research from the literature review, which mostly focused on individuals’ experiences of disempowerment (Hollis, 2014; Kezar, 2011). This study suggests that an intersectional lens can be used to identify marginalized individuals’ unique strengths and not just their unique disadvantages.

**Recommendations**

**Research**

This study has called attention to many exciting opportunities for further research. As mentioned at the end of the discussion, it would be interesting to analyze the data with other
theoretical frameworks that are more strength-based, like the community cultural wealth model. Additionally, there are data from seven interviews that have yet to be analyzed; it would be illuminating to analyze the full group of interviewees and compare them to this subset of the six most junior interviewees. There may also be other interesting identity subsets that could be found within the full interview group or by collecting data from a new set of study participants (e.g., only the early career WOC who were first-generation college students).

Due to the strong findings around the importance of peer relationships, future research could focus on the nature of peer relationships for early career WOC, especially those engaged in social justice change. The strong degree of negative emotions that interviewees felt about their work experiences and working relationships could also be further examined. Lastly, future research could compare the experiences of early career WOC in student affairs with those in other functional areas of higher education or other sectors.

More research is also warranted about the organizational change process, as uniquely experienced and conducted by social justice-motivated early career WOC. Traditional organizational change models have insufficiently described the obstacles encountered by early career WOC change leaders; they have also insufficiently described the strategies and tactics utilized by such individuals in their work. Though prior research on grassroots change leaders and tempered radicals are adjacent areas of research, they are not necessarily the same, as these studies did not focus on the demographic identities of the individuals conducting the work (Kezar, 2011).

**Practice**

I hope that this study can offer something useful to everyone who engages with it, regardless of their identities. Early career WOC can learn valuable tools for surviving and
thriving as student affairs professionals, despite the odds stacked against them. Colleagues of early career WOC can learn how to become better allies to them. Finally, everyone who cares about social justice can learn some strategies and tactics for leading social justice change in their organizations. The study could also benefit other groups that share some commonalities with the subjects of this study, such as young WOC university students or non-WOC early career social justice advocates.

One takeaway for early career WOC is to develop strong relationships and rely on their community for support through challenging times. Early career WOC can also build their self-confidence in order to become more powerful change leaders, since this study’s results suggest that learning how to better advocate for themselves could help early career WOC better advocate for their students and communities.

Another key takeaway for all stakeholders is the power of community and coalition building. This more collaborative approach is also a distinctly non-traditional approach to leadership and change. Those who seek to dismantle hierarchical, patriarchal, and Eurocentric systems can start by embracing alternative models of action in their work.

This study also presents an argument to consider non-colonial models for educating student affairs professionals; rather than only considering formal educational methods, taught by instructor to student and from more privileged to less privileged, early career professionals can look to their own lived experiences and backgrounds as powerful educational resources.

**Conclusion**

This study sought to address the gap in the research about early career WOC engaged in social justice change. Prior research had focused on one or some of these aspects of the work
experience, but there was a dearth of research that addressed the unique experiences of individuals at the intersection of all these identities and activities.

In exploring this topic, the study extended the research about the early career work experience and grassroots change efforts, by exploring how these activities are experienced by WOC. The study’s findings highlighted the extra weight that early career WOC carry as they navigate their work and lead social justice efforts; it can be difficult to support social justice for others while simultaneously being impacted by various social injustices. That said, the study also identified the ways that early career WOC have developed to circumnavigate challenges, by relying on their communities and their own ingenuity to succeed.

There is much more work to be done and opportunities to be explored on this topic. Regardless, I hope that all future practice and research recognizes the skill, resourcefulness, and resilience with which early career WOC navigate their work and focuses on how to empower this remarkable group of social justice change leaders.
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APPENDICES

Appendix A
Pre-Interview Survey Text

I'd like to ask you to fill out this brief form that will collect some basic information about you and your availability to be interviewed for my research study.

Please let me know if you have any questions; you can contact me at adinh3@dons.usfca.edu.

Your name: ____________

The email that you prefer for communication related to this study: ____________

Please indicate the characteristics that apply to you, by checking off the boxes

For this study, I am looking for individuals who fit all of the characteristics described below.
- Currently working in a student affairs role,
- Currently working at one of the University of California campuses,
- Has worked full-time in student affairs for 5 years or fewer in total,
- Identifies as a woman of color, and
- Interested in social justice.

General availability for interview scheduling

The following questions will ask for your general preferences and availability to help me schedule your interview between February 20th and March 22nd.

When you provide your preferences, I recommend thinking about the settings that would help you feel the most collected and present. For example, I can avoid days when you anticipate being too busy to focus on the interview, or find a meeting location that is separated from your workspace.

General preferred days of the week (check all that apply)
- Monday
- Tuesday
- Wednesday
- Thursday
- Friday
- Saturday
- Sunday

General preferred times of day (check all that apply)
- Early Morning (7-9am)
- Morning (9-12pm)
- Afternoon (12-5pm)
- Evening (5-8pm)
- Other

Preferred interview location
- In-Person
- Zoom
- Open to Either
- Depends When the Meeting is Scheduled
- Other

Are there other details you’d like to share to help schedule your interview (e.g., preferred in-person meeting locations, specific dates/times that you prefer, specific dates/times that you want to avoid, etc.)?
Appendix B  
Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

1. To start off, could you please share what motivated you to start working in student affairs?
2. You’ve indicated that you are interested in social justice. This term can mean different things to different people; can you tell me about what “social justice” means to you?

Now I will ask some general questions to learn more about your organization. By “organization,” I mean the local unit/department that you work at, within your institution.

3. Can you briefly describe your organization’s staffing structure (e.g., number of people and org chart, and how you fit into it)?
4. What are some words you would use to describe your working relationship with your colleagues?
   • As you answered that question, were you thinking of your supervisor, peers, or direct reports? Would your answer change depending on which group of colleagues you’re speaking about?
   • Do you feel like your colleagues value your opinions and input?

Now I will ask some questions that explore different situations or experiences that you may have encountered at work.

5. Have you encountered any issues within your organization that, from a social justice lens, you think are problematic or need improvement? If so, could you tell me more about it?
   • Can you tell me about some of the ways that you have responded to this issue?
   • Do you feel like your efforts to address the situation were effective?
   • Did you encounter any resistance to your efforts? What or who were the sources of that resistance? What do you think was the cause of their resistance?
   • Are there ways that you wish you could have responded to the situation, but felt limited from doing so?
6. If you could change some things about your organization to make it easier to work on issues like this, what would those changes be? Why would these changes be helpful?

Finally, I wanted to ask you some questions about your experience in the workplace.

7. Does your identity ever affect how you approach problems in the organization?
   • Which aspects of your identity were you thinking of when you answered this question?
   • Do you feel like the identities you hold have provided any advantages or disadvantages at work? How so?
8. How well do you feel like you fit in at your workplace?
   • Could you describe the demographics of your workplace?
9. Thinking back on the experiences you shared with me today, how do you think these situations might have played out differently for someone with more privileged identities?
I have just two final two questions before we wrap up.

10. Imagine that you could travel back in time to give advice to yourself at the start of your change efforts. What is the advice you would give to your younger self to be successful?

11. I just have one more question left: is there anything else that you think I should know, or any answers you want to clarify or elaborate on, before we end our interview?
Appendix C
Consent Form

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY
Below is a description of the research procedures and an explanation of your rights as a research participant. You should read this information carefully. If you agree to participate, you will sign in the space provided to indicate that you have read and understand the information on this consent form. You are entitled to and will receive a copy of this form.

You have been asked to participate in a research study entitled Early Career Women of Color Student Affairs Professionals & Social Justice Change conducted by Amy Dinh, a master’s student in the Department of Leadership Studies at the University of San Francisco. This faculty supervisor for this study is Professor Seenae Chong, a professor in the Department of Leadership Studies at the University of San Francisco.

WHAT THE STUDY IS ABOUT:
The purpose of this research study is to learn about the work experiences of student affairs professionals who are women of color, in the early stage of their careers, and are interested in social justice change. In particular, the study will ask participants to share their experiences regarding pursuing social justice-focused organizational change.

WHAT WE WILL ASK YOU TO DO:
With your permission, the researcher will audiotape of your interview; if the interview is held over Zoom, she will also ask for your permission to do a videorecording. The recording is to accurately record the information you provide and will be used for transcription purposes only. If you choose not to be audiotaped and/or videorecorded, she will take written notes only. If you agree to being audiotaped and/or videorecorded but feel uncomfortable at any time during the interview, the researcher can turn off the recording device at your request. You can also pause or stop the interview at any time if you do not wish to continue.

DURATION AND LOCATION OF THE STUDY:
Your participation in this study will involve one interview session with a duration of 45-60 minutes. The default setting for this session will be in-person at a location in the Bay Area that you suggest and is mutually convenient for both interviewee and interviewer. As an alternative, the interview can be held online over Zoom, if you have that preference.

POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS:
The risks and benefits associated with this study are a loss of your time and the risks associated with regular activities. The benefit of the study is that it may add to the research on the fields of education, student affairs, and multicultural issues. This information, once collected, might be read by policymakers, educational experts, educators, and scholars, and could affect the educational practice. If you do not want to participate in the study, you will not be mentioned in any documents of the study and your decision not to participate will not be told to anyone. You may choose to withdraw your consent and discontinue your participation at any time during the study without penalty. If you are upset by any of the questions asked, the researcher will refer
you to counseling services available publicly or at the university if you are a member of the academic community (student, staff, or faculty).

**BENEFITS:**
You will receive no direct benefit from your participation in this study; however, the possible benefits to others include generating knowledge that aids early career, women of color student affairs professionals who are interested in social justice, as well as others who seek to support such individuals in their professional development and social justice work.

**PRIVACY/CONFIDENTIALITY:**
Any data you provide in this study will be kept confidential unless disclosure is required by law. In any report published, no information will be included that will make it possible to identify you or any individual participant. To minimize the risks to confidentiality, real names will be replaced by pseudonyms on all interview and observation transcripts. All audio/video files, observation notes, or other documents that contain personal identifiers will be stored in a password-protected computer (if they are electronic files) or locked file cabinet (if they are print-outs) until the research has been completed. Original audio-files will be destroyed at the completion of the study. Consent forms and any other identifiable data will be destroyed 3 years from the date of data collection.

**COMPENSATION/PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATION:**
There is no payment or other form of compensation for your participation in this study.

**VOLUNTARY NATURE OF THE STUDY:**
Your participation is voluntary, and you may refuse to participate without penalty or loss of benefits. Furthermore, you may skip any questions or tasks that make you uncomfortable and may discontinue your participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits. In addition, the researcher has the right to withdraw you from participation in the study at any time.

**OFFER TO ANSWER QUESTIONS:**
Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you should contact the principal investigator, Amy Dinh, at adinh3@dons.usfca.edu or the faculty supervisor, Seenae Chong, at (408) 421-2085 or srchong@usfca.edu. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a participant in this study, you may contact the University of San Francisco Institutional Review Board at IRBPHS@usfca.edu.

**I HAVE READ THE ABOVE INFORMATION. ANY QUESTIONS I HAVE ASKED HAVE BEEN ANSWERED. I AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS RESEARCH PROJECT AND I WILL RECEIVE A COPY OF THIS CONSENT FORM.**

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**PARTICIPANT'S SIGNATURE**

**DATE**