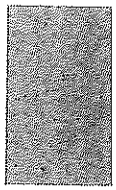
BACKGROUND: SOCIAL IDENTITY AND SITUATING OURSELVES

CHAPTER 1



CHAPTER CONTENTS

Reading a book like this takes effort. It asks us to examine our society and also to examine ourselves in society. Even though racism in the United States affects us all, we will have a variety of individual reactions to this material. Some people of color reading this book may think they already know the content or may feel ambivalent about the pain that the content evokes. Some white people will experience resistance, denial, or powerful feelings of guilt and shame. Even the terms "white" or "people of color" (discussed in Chapter 2) are contested and can evoke varied, and at times powerful, reactions. Racism is not a neutral topic. It stirs up strong reactions and feelings in all of us. Yet, if we are to become competent helping professionals, we must take steps to confront racism as it is manifested in society, in our professions, and within ourselves.

None of us *is a bystander* in a society structured by racism. We either benefit from it or suffer the consequences of it, or, in some instances, we do both. When we say "benefit," we are referring to the unearned privileges that white people have in American society as a result of racism. But ultimately racism hurts and degrades us all, even those with race privilege. It undermines democracy and scapegoats and dehumanizes people, poisons the wells of interpersonal contact, fosters friction between groups, and causes people to doubt or feel badly about themselves or to unfairly condemn and degrade others. For those in the helping professions, racism undercuts their work with consumers and creates schisms among colleagues.

Pain, confusion, and strong emotions will accompany any serious examination of racism—particularly in a context that engages us personally and professionally and is not merely an analytic or academic endeavor. Fear of emotional pain can lead people to approach the subject of racism with wariness or detachment. In engaging in this work, we accept the risk of becoming vulnerable to being wounded along the way.

Because the spectrum of racism is vast, deep, and far-reaching, some readers may feel overwhelmed or resigned to it. These reactions are understandable, but we should keep in mind that racism has been challenged successfully, in the United States and elsewhere, and maintain the belief that all aspects of racism can be overcome someday. We cannot allow the complexity of racism to overpower us.

Racism is pervasive in the United States today, and helping professionals are obligated to work to dismantle racism and overcome its insidious effects. Ultimately, all human beings are entitled to equal rights, and we must visualize a nation in which all are validated and respected. To that aim, readers should strive to accept the strong reactions and feelings that this exploration is likely to engender. Profound feelings can be a source of motivation and inspiration for changing ourselves and our social world. As we confront racism and struggle to undermine it, we empower ourselves.

Ultimately, dismantling racism will benefit us all individually and will support a better society and nation collectively. In reading this book and working against racism, we also must acknowledge that each of us has had

different experiences of racism and privilege. For some, this is a new area for consideration, and for others it has been a daily struggle throughout life. This book is for all helping professionals, regardless of race.

Some of the content is geared more toward one group or another. This is part of the challenge of writing and talking about race and racism. We come to the topic with a range of experiences. Some of us have been targets of racism and others have race privilege. Whether we identify as a person of color, white, biracial, or multiracial, or have a strong or weak ethnic identity, as individuals we resist being categorized or being subjected to assumptions that do not respect us as unique and intricate beings. At times, though, generalizations are needed when discussing race and racism. We also offer examples to illustrate specific points and concepts, and these should not be construed as conveying the dynamic, multidimensional complexity of people's lives and experiences.

When studying or discussing racism—including while reading this book—you may feel frustrated that your personal experience is overlooked. You should channel this frustration into continued learning and communicating and use the frustration as motivation for anti-racism activism, including offering feedback and contributing to teaching and leadership roles.

Ultimately, no one reading this book is responsible for the systemic racism that has hobbled our nation from its inception. As professionals and citizens, however, we are responsible for how we respond to racism today—in our own lives and in the lives of our clients. Thus, when learning about the nature of racism and counteracting the impact that racism has had on us, we should strike a balance between pushing ourselves to do more while also being gentle with ourselves and others. In any case, we must press ourselves past our comfort zone to our learning edge and be open to absorbing new content, skills, and insights about ourselves and society.

Racism has a long history and deep tentacles, and overcoming it will take time and persistence. We may learn and explore things about ourselves that we do not like, some of which will be unpleasant or even abhorrent. And we will encounter bias and prejudice in others. Although self-awareness and self-monitoring are important and critical to this process, excessive self-criticism can be detrimental. It can lead us to shut down or, if we are unduly impatient with others, cause them to shut down. This does not further the cause of anti-racism.

Beyond confronting ourselves and others and taking responsibility for what we say and do, we should work to develop patience and compassion for the struggle that anti-racism work involves. We are imperfect beings trying to be decent people doing good work. We will make mistakes. We may hurt people inadvertently or be hurt ourselves. At times, we may think we have regressed or feel more angry or confused than enlightened. All of these reactions are normal and predictable when undertaking a project as complex, challenging, and important as this one. Thus, a balance between pushing ourselves to do more and accepting our limitations is helpful in this work.

SOCIAL IDENTITY

Most of us want to be viewed as individuals and not placed in social categories or be typecast by others. We do not appreciate people making assumptions about who we are, particularly based on our appearance. This is part of what is so pernicious about racism: It stems from a social construction of race, a system of categorizing and generalizing about people based on physical characteristics and the alleged deeper meanings. We will consider this concept in greater detail in Chapter 2, but for now it is important to note the tension between the understandable wish to author our own identities and the social reality of how our identities can be assumed or even imposed by others.

When talking about race and racism, we do not want to be viewed solely as racial beings. We are far more complex than that. Our social identity has many facets—gender, social class, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion—which together constitute who we are as social beings. Social identity is a useful construct as we approach the topic of race and racism. It helps us situate ourselves and be mindful of who we are in relation to students, colleagues, consumers, and others.

What is meant by social identity? This is a central topic in Chapters 6 and 7, but it is helpful to introduce the concept now so we can "situate" ourselves. Tajfel (1981) described social identity as that part of our self-concept that comes from our membership in social groups, the value we place on this membership, and what it means to us emotionally. For example, one of the authors identifies as white and Jewish and the other as Puerto Rican, Black, and a person of color. These are statements about our race and ethnicity. The first author is racially constructed as white, while he identifies himself ethnically as Jewish. The co-author identifies herself racially as a person of color and ethnically as Puerto Rican and African American.

Each of us has a range of feelings associated with these social categories. The statements about who we are also contain an assumption about another social category—gender—as one author is male and the other female. Although observers might be able to tell that one of us is white and male and the other is a person of color and female, they might not be able to discern that one of us is Jewish or one of us is part Puerto Rican. They also would not be able to say how we feel about our gender, ethnicity and race, unless we tell them. But, like it or not, people will be making assumptions about us when they see us, as this is a normal human response.

Tajfel's definition of social identity has been criticized for being too individualistic (Eriksen, 2001; Kelman, 2001). People do not always choose their social identities. Social identities emerge at certain times under specific conditions; they are shaped by social and cultural contexts, public discourses, national myths, and intergroup relations. For example, the meaning of being Jewish in Europe shifted before, during, and after World War II. A Jewish person who was no longer observant and whose ethnic or religious affiliation as a Jew had little or no personal meaning would have been defined as Jewish during the Nazi era, like it or not. In Rwanda, with its recent genocidal conflict,

the meaning of being a Tutsi or a Hutu is woven inextricably into the relationships, perceptions, and history between the two ethnic groups. As we consider in Chapter 3, throughout U.S. history people have been granted privileges or have encountered barriers or overt oppression based on social constructions of their race.

Social identity is how we see ourselves in relation to others. It reflects two powerful social motives: our desire to be included and be part of a group, and at the same time our need for individuation and separateness (Brewer, 2001). This is how we internalize being part of our social world and influences how we position, align, and categorize ourselves, how we join with and individuate ourselves from others. It is the sense of self that we bring with us to work, to school, in public, at home—every environment and system that we are part of—although what we bring and share about ourselves varies considerably among cultures and depends upon social contexts. Some aspects of our social identity are self-selected, customized, and individualized. Others are collectively constructed, shared with others, and at times imposed.

SITUATING OURSELVES

Rather than talk abstractly about social identity, let us explore our social identities together. Figure 1.1 presents a diagram encompassing social identity: age, sexual identity, chosen interests, nationality, social class, economic status, gender, health status, religion, ethnicity, race, and political affiliation. Also, pieces of our identity reflect our personal history (such as growing up on a farm in South Carolina) and personal interests (such as amateur jazz musician). Already we can see how some of our social identity is chosen, some is inherited, other parts are imposed, and all aspects have meanings that are socially constructed. On the outer edge of the pie we have listed environmental factors that shape social identity: family, culture, institutions, political climate, economy, history, community, religion, and geography.

This might be a good time to draw your own social identity pie (see Exercise 1.1). If you do this exercise in class or in a group, it can be productive to discuss the questions listed in Exercise 1.1 in pairs. After thinking or talking about the questions, some of the following points might emerge:

- *Identity changes over time.* If we had drawn our pies 5 or 10 years ago, would they have looked the same as they do today? Probably not. Some aspects are enduring, and others have changed or shifted in importance. As we encounter new experiences and the world around us changes, our social identity evolves. It is dynamic, not a static part of ourselves. (We will consider phases of social identity development in Chapter 6.)
- *Some of our identity is chosen, some is imposed, and at times identity is a combination of the two.* We have choices over some parts of our social identity, but we receive other pieces from others and society. Also, there is a dynamic interaction between the parts that are imposed and the parts

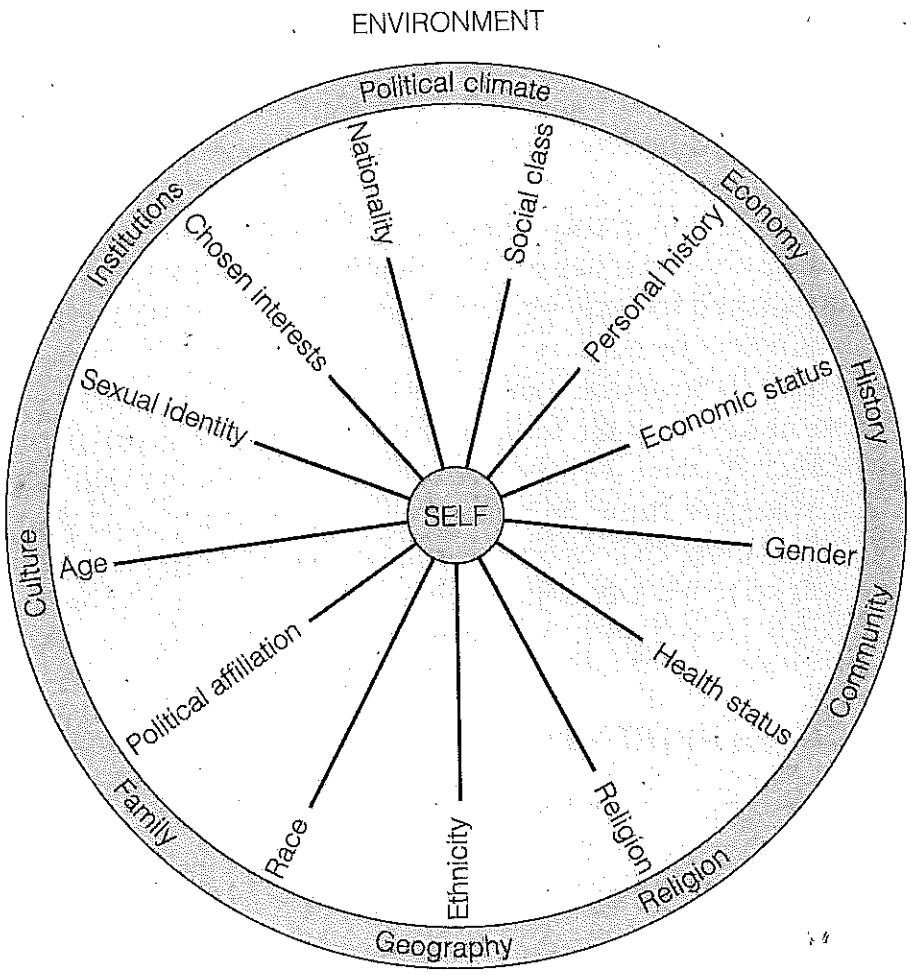


FIGURE 1.1 | SOCIAL IDENTITY PIE

that are chosen. Although our race may be socially constructed by society, the meaning we make of it is our choice.

- *Some of our identity is conscious, and other parts are unconscious.* We are always aware of some parts of our identity, and others we take for granted or think about only when we are doing an exercise such as this. It is useful to reflect on *why* we are so aware of some parts of our identity and unaware of others.
- *What is salient in our social identities differs among people.* For example, although my friend and I both may be female and African American and Puerto Rican, the meaning that either of these facets of our identity has for each of us may differ considerably. One of us may identify strongly with both of her ethnic heritages, and the other of us may identify only with one heritage and be identified most with being a lesbian.
- *What is salient in our social identities is influenced by context.* If a white man is in a classroom with a lot of other white men, he may not be

conscious of his race or gender. If he is the only man in a class full of women, he is likely to be highly aware that he is male, or in a class where he is the only white person, very aware of his race. Eriksen (2001) offered the construct that social identity is relational, situational, and flexible.

- *Conflict and oppression can heighten our awareness of our social identity.* Social identities forged in conflict usually are salient, while those that are part of the mainstream or carry a lot of privilege are often less visible. (We will consider this dynamic in greater detail in Chapters 5, 6, and [7.)]
- *Social identity is co-created in micro relations.* Moffat and Miehls (1999) made the point that how we construct our social identity varies from relationship to relationship and from one interaction to another. The parts of self that emerge with an old friend may be very different from the parts that are prominent when meeting with a supervisor.

These points about social identity can be helpful to keep in mind when taking a course on racism, talking about racism in groups, or even reading a book like this. It is helpful to position ourselves, to think about our social identity, and to consider the social identities of people with whom we are interacting or reading about. We all have social identities, which vary considerably from person to person and have different significance and meaning for each individual. We must respect our diversity and appreciate our different experiences.

POWER, PRIVILEGE, AND SOCIAL IDENTITY

If diversity of social identity were only about difference, we would understand and appreciate one another more readily. But some aspects of our social identity carry social privileges and power while others are targeted or disparaged. One way to conceptualize this difference is the notion of agent and target (Hardiman & Jackson, 1997). *Agent status* denotes power, privilege, and the capacity to define and determine what is "normal." *Target status* means that social identity places a person with a group that is discriminated against, marginalized, and oppressed. Figure 1.2 illustrates which aspects of identity are privileged or oppressed, using an agent/target line. Agents (privileged) are shown above the line, and the targets are shown below the line.

Although the diagram presents agent and target status as dichotomous, they rarely are that clearcut. Some people of color have a great deal of target status because of their race (or skin color, hair texture, accent, or language) and are harassed and oppressed constantly. Others experience racism only occasionally. A multiracial person may experience both target and agent status at different times. Further, most people have social identities that are mixed, in which some aspects are targeted and others are privileged (Hardiman & Jackson, 1997). Some people with a similar mixture of target–agent status in their social identities feel privileged, and others in similar circumstances

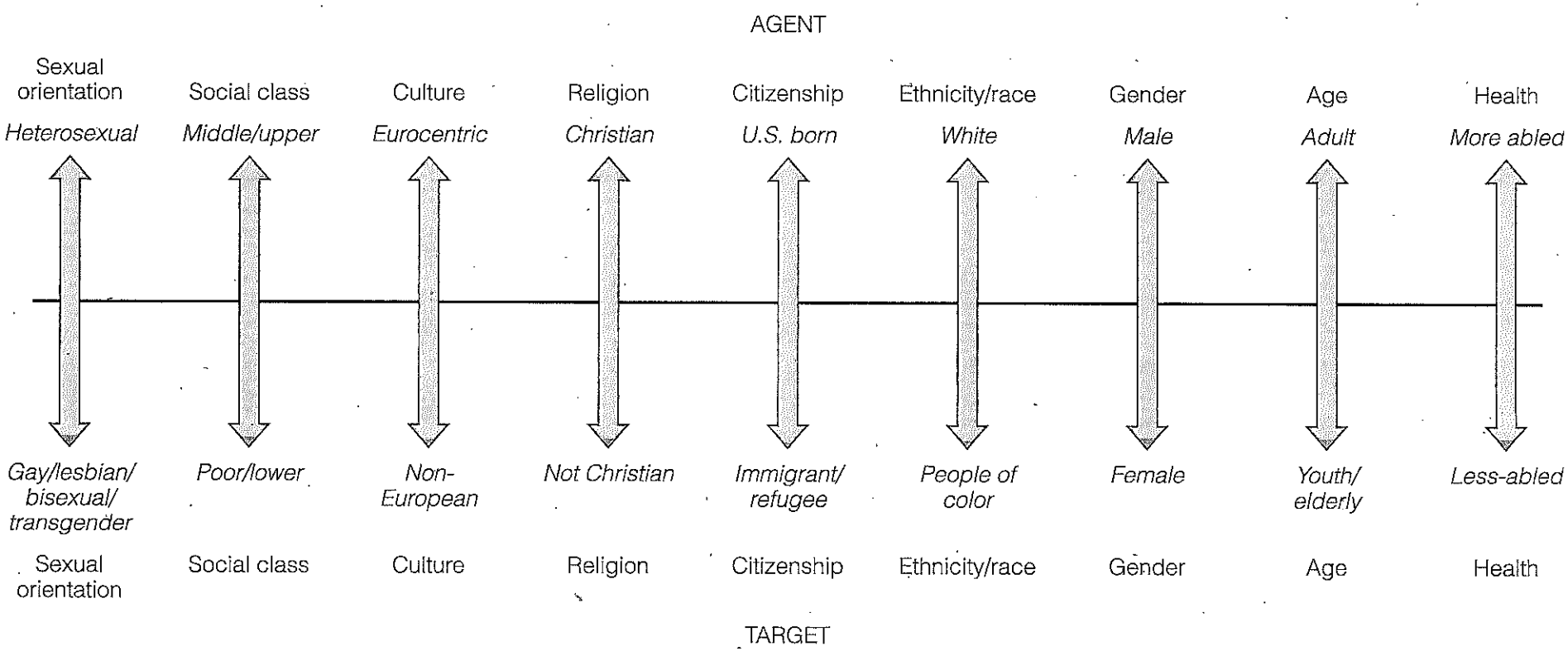


FIGURE 1.2 | AGENT-TARGET IDENTITIES

Source: "Conceptual Foundations for Social Justice Courses," by R. Hardiman and B.W. Jackson, in *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice: A Sourcebook* (New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 16–29.

consider themselves to be targeted. We cannot assume that we understand the meaning of another person's social identity.

Despite these caveats, it makes a huge difference whether a person's social identity is mostly privileged or is targeted. This explains why racism is much more profound than individual biases and prejudices (discussed in Chapter 2). Differences in social identity reflect differential social privilege, power, and access to resources. When talking about social identity and difference, these disparities always should be taken into account. It is not a level playing field of difference but, rather, a crater-pocked landscape of inequality. Those with the most privilege usually are the least aware of it, as culture and society mirror the centrality of these forms of status. People who have parts of their identity targeted find quite the opposite. This is one of the greatest challenges in talking about race and racism. For further work on social identity, see Exercise 1.3.

COMFORT ZONES, LEARNING EDGES, TRIGGERS, AND CREATING A CONTEXT FOR LEARNING

Certain concepts can assist us when we are trying to learn about racism and other forms of oppression, including the notions of comfort zones, learning edges, and triggers (Griffin, 1997). *Comfort zones* are the safe places from where we generally operate, where things are familiar and predictable, and where we feel most in control. If we stay inside our comfort zones, we have little impetus for change, we surround ourselves with the well known, and we do not challenge ourselves with new information or experiences. Moving too far away from our comfort zone can feel threatening and evoke a great deal of anxiety. This can lead us to withdraw or shut down.

Griffin (1997) suggests that the balance we should strive to achieve is our *learning edge*—that place where we are on the edge of our comfort zone—not so far out that we panic, but looking out at the world and taking small steps away from our safe place. At the learning edge we try to remain open to new perspectives, enhancing our awareness of self and others and ultimately learning new information that we can integrate into new understandings. We have achieved a balance between comfort and discomfort, stability and instability, having an anchor while allowing ourselves to sail into new waters.

As we move to our learning edge, we usually encounter some internal mine fields that can be activated by *triggers*: words, ideas, or statements that set off a strong emotional reaction (Griffin, 1997). Triggers often strike an emotional vein, either unconscious or conscious, that holds reservoirs of pain, frustration, confusion, guilt, or shame. We all have triggers and should not be alarmed by them. The key thing is to learn about what they are, recognize them when they arise, and learn to handle them rather than have them manage you. Exercise 1.2 offers some suggestions.

Identifying comfort zones, learning edges, and triggers requires self-reflection. It can be useful to identify what fears and hopes people have in group

situations, such as when taking a course on racism or working in an agency exploring racism or a related topic. Identifying hopes and aspirations enables individuals to define and express their goals for the course, workshop, or discussion; indicates areas of convergence and divergence; and allows teachers and facilitators to clarify realistic goals for the group.

Expressing fears and concerns also is helpful, as this allows for venting anxiety, as well as providing an opportunity for members to collectively generate ideas for managing the group process effectively. It also can lead to suggestions and ideas about how to proceed if the group becomes stuck or if excessive conflict breaks out.

Setting Guidelines

The group discussion can lead to a consensus about guidelines or norms for the group—which is why you may want to engage in the process early on. Guidelines help to create structure based on a group contract that supports the establishment of a learning culture and clarifies expectations. This, in turn, serves as a platform from which to explore racism. Helpful guidelines include

- maintaining confidentiality (only themes, not names, will be taken outside of the group),
- listening carefully,
- treating one another with respect,
- confronting without trying to shame,
- taking responsibility when making statements, and
- not having to represent one's racial/ethnic group.

Emerging norms will be unique to the group, and these are valuable to identify and practice. Having this discussion and allowing the norms to surface usually is a more successful approach than imposing a boilerplate set of norms. The group must take ownership of its guidelines and not view them as merely being the responsibility of the instructor or facilitator.

Journal Writing

Another way to further a group or classroom climate of authentic introspection is the use of journals. Dealing with racism evokes strong feelings, and classroom discussion can be supplemented by keeping journals. Sometimes feelings arise when reading a book or article, or a person may have a delayed reaction to something that came up in a workshop or class. The act of writing allows us to become more aware of our thoughts and feelings and to be able to reflect on what we find.

A journal also can represent a safer space to process difficult, confusing, embarrassing, and conflictual material. Trusted people, including instructors and others, might be invited to read the journals and offer comments and encouragement. Journal writers, of course, are not to be judged or evaluated for

what they write. Journal writing must be done with an "anything goes" attitude.

Creating a Safe Environment

Often, people embarking on an exploration of race and racism will say they need to feel safe when processing difficult material. The suggestions presented here lend themselves to creating safer learning contexts that are conducive to learning and growth. As should be clear by now, learning about racism is not merely an academic enterprise. It combines substantive knowledge with self-awareness. This involves taking risks, moving out of our comfort zones, and being open to new experiences and to feedback.

Although the risk of hurt feelings or bruised self-esteem is always there, these reactions can spur growth and self-awareness. Ultimately we cannot learn about racism without taking some emotional risks, keeping in mind that the risks of exploring racism in a book or class are minor in comparison to the risks that racism poses to people of color day in and day out. Ultimately, exploring racism in a class can be beneficial to everyone, especially when this leads to action to dismantle racism.

CONCLUSION

This book and courses and workshops on racism and other issues of diversity are likely to engender strong emotional reactions, influenced and moderated by a sense of one's social identity. The following exercises can help in identifying and investigating aspects of social identity. Three relevant concepts are comfort zone, learning edge, and triggers. The learning environment should encourage openness to new information and experiences, appreciation of difference, recognition of differential social power and privilege, and self-awareness and examination.

The next three chapters will explore how racism is conceptualized, review the history of racism in the United States, and explore the manifestations of institutional racism today. Using the concepts and techniques presented in this chapter should provide a structure and foundation for engaging with this challenging material.

Exercise 1.1 Social Identity

On a blank piece of paper, draw your own social identity pie. Look at the pie presented in this chapter and think about which parts are relevant to you. You might draw certain pieces of your pie as being very big and others very small. Some pieces of the pie in this chapter may not be relevant for you, or some aspects of your social identity may be missing. You may want to draw your pie to reflect these differences. Draw your pie in whatever shape, with whatever contents and in whatever proportions, best describes you.

Either on your own or in pairs, consider the following questions:

1. Which parts of your social identity are most important and meaningful for you and why?
2. Which parts are apparent to others and which are more hidden?
3. Which parts did you consciously choose and which parts do you feel were imposed upon you?
4. Which parts of your identity give you the greatest source of pride and satisfaction?
5. Which parts of your identity cause the most confusion or ambivalence?
6. When you are in classes or at work, which parts of your identity come to life and which parts are in the background?
7. Do you ever have to monitor whether you present or hide certain parts of your identity?

Exercise 1.2 Exploring Triggers

This exercise can be done in pairs, in small groups, or individually.

1. *When discussing race and racism,* what triggers you?
2. What triggers you?
3. What responses are most typical for you when you are triggered?
4. What gets you stirred up for you when you are triggered?
5. What do you find helps you or works for you when you are triggered?
6. What guidelines for classroom discussion would you find helpful?

Exercise 1.3 Racial Identity Formation

This exercise should be done in pairs, with each member of the pair interviewing the other.

1. When did you first become aware of your race and ethnicity?
2. Did any "critical incidents" shape your awareness of your identity?
3. How has your racial or ethnic identity affected your life?
4. How does your racial or ethnic identity intersect with other aspects of your identity?
5. In what ways are you targeted? In what ways are you privileged? How do these different aspects of your identity interact?

After conducting the interview, write it up or discuss it in class. Consider how your partner's experience with racial identity formation is similar to or different from yours. What did you learn about your partner and yourself? In what ways are you similar and different?