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Working through the Smog: How White Individuals Develop Critical Consciousness of White Saviorism

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Abstract

White saviorism, as a form of individual, cultural, and institutional racism, results in the systemic silencing and dehumanization of Brown and Black individuals by maintaining white privilege while simultaneously upholding systems of oppression. One step that can be taken to work toward eliminating white saviorism is to support white individuals in becoming more effective in their racial justice efforts, particularly with regard to changing the structures and systems upholding current power imbalances. This study seeks to understand how white individuals develop critical consciousness of white saviorism. In doing so, this study seeks to provide findings that can be utilized in the development of supportive interventions to strengthen white individuals' capacities to eliminate power imbalances maintaining white saviorism. This qualitative, phenomenological research explores how seven white individuals from a diverse array of disciplines and backgrounds are developing critical consciousness of white saviorism. Each participant was interviewed one time via video chat or phone call for approximately an hour. The interviews were then coded thematically. The research draws from an interdisciplinary perspective and identifies how white racial identity development informs the development of critical consciousness of white saviorism. The research identifies five stages experienced by the white study participants who are developing critical consciousness of white saviorism including; socialization, dissonance, distance and performance, introspection, and reconstruction. The discussion explores how these five stages might influence which types of support are most effective at each stage in the development of critical consciousness of white saviorism.

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Critical Consciousness of White Saviorism

As a result of the racial justice efforts led by Brown and Black activists, there is growing

public awareness in white-dominant society of white saviorism. This has created a social

moment where increased access to public sphere communication platforms, namely social media,

byvoices who have been historically silenced has made it increasingly difficult for white

individuals to avoid being confronted with the reality of racism. As a result of the ongoing

efforts of those critiquing white saviorism, the notion of a white savior is beginning to reach

dominant media platforms such as *Late Night with Seth Meyers*, who recently produced the

"White Savior: The Movie Trailer" as a critique of hollywood films that have reproduced white

savior narratives. Yet, dominant media platforms that have covered the topic of the white savior

have yet to grapple with the systemic nature of the white savior complex and the harm it results

in. As white individuals are confronted with critiques of white saviorism and are exposed to this

idea of the white savior, the current social moment necessitates research to guide understandings

of how to support white individuals with navigating the dissonance they experience when

confronted with realities that fundamentally challenge their understanding of the world.

Without effective supports available for developing critical consciousness of white

saviorism, white fragility often poses a critical barrier to white individuals' ability to listen to and

value the perspectives of Brown and Black individuals critiquing white saviorism. Robin

DiAngelo (2011) defines white fragility as a "state in which even a minimum amount of racial

stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves" (p. 54). White fragility

maintains the white savior complex by emphasizing white individuals' emotional desires for

comfort over the harm done to Brown and Black individuals. However, there are white

individuals who are committed to developing critical consciousness of white saviorism. This

study seeks to understand who and what has supported them in their journeys as well as how this

process of developing critical consciousness informs their approach to their racial justice work.

By deepening understandings of the journeys of white individuals developing critical

consciousness of white saviorism, this study also has a broader goal of contributing to

conversations on how to increase the effectiveness of white individuals' racial justice work.

There is need for additional research on how to support white individuals with

developing critical awareness of their whiteness in order to unlearn racism (Case 2012;

hooks,1992; Giroux, 1997; Tatum, 1997). This study seeks to contribute to this broader

conversation by answering the question: How do white individuals develop critical

consciousness of white saviorism? For the purpose of this study, I define white saviorism as a

series of racial projects made up of mentalities, narratives, and systems that construct racial

group meanings and responsibilities within a server-served juxtaposition (Loseke, 2007;

Mitchell, 2008; Omi and Winant, 2014). White individuals are positioned as the servers and

Brown and Black communities are positioned as the objects of the service. Through this

juxtaposition, white privilege is reproduced while Brown and Black communities are

simultaneously oppressed through cultural, institutional, and/or individual forms of racism (Cole,

2012; Endres & Gould, 2009; Flaherty, 2016).

Critical consciousness, or *conscientização*, is the development of the awakening of

critical awareness (Freire, 1974). It is not only the development of critical awareness, but also the

beginning of one's journey in taking action against the oppressive realities one is becoming

aware of (Freire, 1970). In his works, Freire utilizes *conscientização* to describe how individuals

develop critical awareness of who and what oppresses them. Inspired by Freire's understanding

of critical consciousness, I utilize the term to look at how white individuals develop critical

consciousness of the ways in which whiteness oppresses others. Although I recognize the process

of developing critical consciousness of who and what is oppressing you is not the same as the

process of developing critical consciousness of how your identity is oppressing others, I do

believe the terminology is helpful for framing both experiences. However, since identity is

intersectional, it is important to note critical consciousness is developed through the complex

interplay of both one's oppressed and oppressor identities.

Also helpful for understanding critical consciousness is feminist theorist and cultural

critic bell hooks' employment of the term "consciousness-raising" to describe the act of learning

and teaching about "a system of domination, how it became institutionalized and how it is

perpetuated and maintained" (hooks, 2000, p. 7). Both terms put forth by Freire and hooks

illustrate the importance of developing a critical lens for unpacking societal realities: they are

essential to dismantling white supremacy.

I made the decision to focus on how white individuals develop critical consciousness of

white saviorism because white individuals as a racial group have privilege that Brown and Black

individuals do not, privilege that must be utilized to work towards eliminating the white savior

complex as a form of systemic racism. However, white individuals will not eliminate the white

savior complex on their own. This work must be done in partnership with Brown and Black

individuals who are most directly harmed by white saviorism. If white individuals continue to be

the only people dominating leadership positions and continue to only prioritize the voices of one another, even if their work is said to be done in the name of racial justice, such an approach still continues to systematically silence Brown and Black communities, thus maintaining white saviorism.

White individuals as a racial group currently control the narratives and institutions upholding the white savior complex. The white savior complex reinforces white savior narratives by shaping who has control over the media and the dominant narratives being reproduced. bell hooks asserts that those seeking to uphold systems of racial domination recognize the significant value in controlling how race is represented in dominant cultural narratives (1992, p. 2). Jordan Flaherty, a journalist who has written extensively on white saviorism, found in a report released by the American Society of News Editors in 2014 that the number of Black newsroom employees was only 4.78 percent (Flaherty, 2016, p. 87). The dominant news media is not the only space where there is significant racial underrepresentation. Racial underrepresentation in positions of power is also pervasive in Hollywood, an essential institution in the reproduction of white savior narratives. In terms of racial representation in organizational leadership positions, a 2018 study released by Quantum Impact found of the 162 organizations they analyzed, 4 out of 5 organizations (80 percent) had leadership teams that did not have a representative number of people of color. Half of all organizations (51 percent) had no leaders of color. Of the 777 leaders they analyzed for race/ethnicity, they identified only 16 percent as leaders of color. Eighty-two percent of the organizations analyzed for this report were not-for-profits (Quantum Impact, 2018). These findings illustrate the significant underrepresentation of Brown and Black voices in institutions and organizations controlling representations of racial meanings and responsibilities.

Lastly, it is important to center this work with an acknowledgement that this study and my own personal critical consciousness of white saviorism is made possible by the work of Black and Brown individuals who have historically called attention to the white savior complex and who continue to do so. I seek to contribute to the collective effort of educating people on how we can unlearn racism and develop critical consciousness to advance social justice.

Literature Review

White saviorism serves as a form of individual, cultural, and systemic racism. In order to understand white saviorism as a form of racism at each of these levels, I weave together work in the fields of journalism and communications, sociology, psychology, education, philosophy, and anthropology, which together have contributed to understandings of racism and whiteness. I also incorporate interdisciplinary writings on topics related to racial injustice and the role of white individuals in addressing racial inequities. In putting these contributions in conversation with one another, this review of the current literature on whiteness and white saviorism as a form of racism seeks to provide a more holistic understanding of white saviorism. By looking at white saviorism holistically, we are potentially better positioned to dismantle the white savior complex.

In this study, I frame white savior mentalities as the *individual* level of white saviorism, white savior narratives as the *cultural* level of white saviorism, and the white savior complex as the *institutional and systemic* levels of white saviorism. Figure 1 provides a visual representation of these levels.

White Savior
Complex

White Savior
Narratives

White Savior
Mentalities

Individual Racism

Cultural Racism

*Institutional &
Systemic Racism*
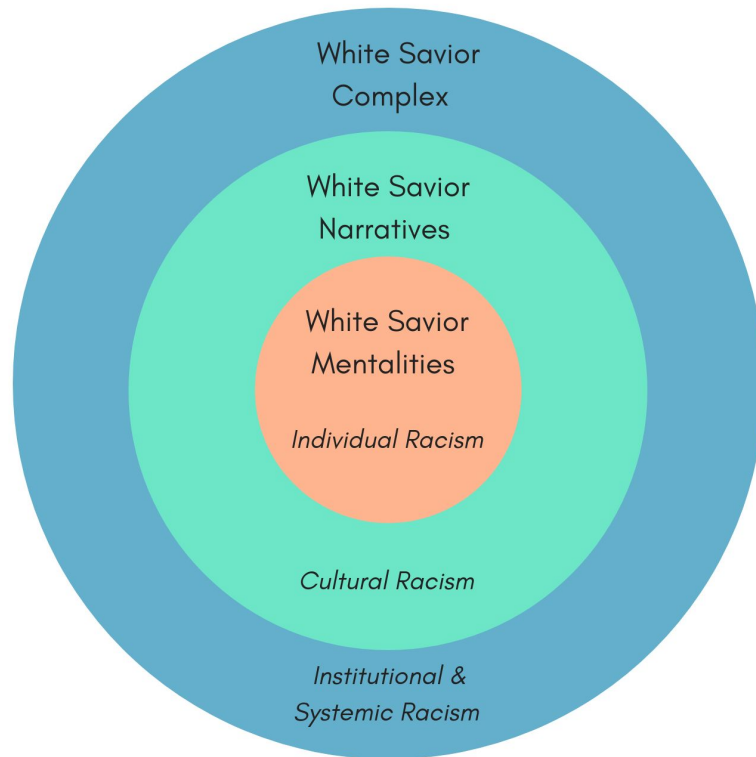
Figure 1

I elaborate on each of the levels of white saviorism outlined in Figure 1 in my

subsequent review of the literature. If we soley understand white saviorism as a mentality, we

may neglect to grapple with the ways in which white saviorism serves to uphold white

supremacist structures. We also potentially lose sight of the power and control embedded within

white saviorism. If we only understand white saviorism as a complex, we may neglect to

understand the important role of individuals and organizations in dismantling white saviorism.

The Social Construction of Race

Sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant's (2014) racial formation theory provides

a useful framework for looking at race as a social construct by framing the construction of race

through the concept of *racial projects*. Racial formation describes the sociohistorical process by

which racial categories are continually created, reproduced, maintained, and destroyed through

racial projects (Omi and Winant, 2014, p. 55). Not all racial projects are racist. In fact, there are

racial projects which seek to challenge dominant meanings of whiteness that uphold white

supremacist structures (hooks, 1992). One example of a racial project that critiques the white

savior complex and challenges dominant meanings of whiteness is the *No White Saviors*

Instagram account. In contrast, there are racial projects which create or reproduce structural

oppression along racial lines (Omi and Winant, 2014). Narratives serve as an example of racial

projects. Narratives are created, reproduced, and contested through various media including, but

not limited to, books, films, news articles, marketing campaigns, and blog posts.

When put into conversation with Omi and Winant, sociologist Donileen Loseke's (2007)

narrative identity theory is helpful for looking at how narratives inform our understandings of

race and impact our broader sociopolitical contexts. Narratives serve as revealing landscapes for

examining dominant culture and the messages informing individuals' understandings of

themselves and others. Not only do white savior narratives reflect race relations in society, they

also play an important role in reproducing privilege and power by ascribing meanings to

whiteness as being superior to all other races and informing how white individuals respond to

racial inequality.

Racial Identity Development

Narratives inform racial identity development. Loseke describes the images and messages

embedded in narratives as symbolic codes. Symbolic codes inform understandings of ourselves

and others. They construct identities in relationship to one another. These codes define rights,

responsibilities, and expectations attached to identities as well as expected affective responses to

one another (Loseke, 2007, p. 666). Symbolic codes, particularly in Western cultures, construct

identities as binary opposites (2007, p.666). White savior narratives position white individuals

and any other racial identities within a binary opposite through the construction of a

server-served juxtaposition. Meanings of whiteness are associated with the "server" role and all

other racial identities are homogenized into a "served" role in the binary opposite.

This juxtaposition is designed to teach white individuals their role in the world is to save

Brown and Black individuals. It is not only the roles and responsibilities of white individuals that

are being taught through white savior narratives but also the roles and responsibilities of Brown

and Black individuals. The narratives are designed to teach Brown and Black individuals they

are not capable of making decisions for themselves and their communities. These narratives are

institutionalized into white supremacist social structures where these meanings attached to racial

identity lead to the attempted justification of white domination over Brown and Black

communities (Loseke, 2007).

The individual and cultural impact of Loseke's symbolic codes are further explained by

psychologist Beverly Tatum's work on racial identity development. The symbolic codes

embedded in white savior narratives become internalized through white savior mentalities. Our

mentalities –the way we think about the ourselves and those around us– are shaped by dominant

narratives. These mentalities are both conscious and subconscious. Our racial identity

development is shaped by our mentalities. Tatum defines racial identity development as "the

process of defining for oneself the personal significance and social meaning of belonging to a

particular racial group" (1997, p. 16). Our process of making sense of our racial identity is

connected to the narratives we are fed about our racial group. White savior narratives shape

understandings of social meanings of race. These meanings impact how we interact with one another in a racialized context (Tatum, 1997, p. 94).

The symbolic codes present in white savior narratives are a form of cultural racism. They position whiteness as superior and all other races as inferior. Tatum suggests cultural racism is "like smog in the air" (Tatum, 1997, p. 6). Cultural racism, like smog, is constantly breathed in by all members of society. Deficit-based and dehumanizing images of Brown and Black individuals rooted in racialized stereotypes are not only absorbed by white individuals but also Brown and Black individuals (Tatum, 1997, p. 55).

Dehumanization & Othering

In her well-known TED Talk, "The Danger of a Single Story", author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie asserts that dehumanization involves reducing a complex group of people into one simplified stereotype, attempting to systemically deny individuals the ability to define their own identity and reality at the cultural level (2009). As a form of systemic racism, the white savior complex controls the production and maintenance of single stories filled with symbolic codes of dehumanizing racialized stereotypes. Reflecting on the impact of this dehumanization process on those who are oppressed by the white savior complex, Teddy Ruge, an international social change innovator and leader born in Uganda, (known online as TMS Ruge) asserts:

> When we're unable to actually defend our own agency, our own worth against this structural racism, it actually creates a further problem because we have generations that are watching and learning where they belong, what their agency is, what their responsibility is, what their opportunity is. (Costello, 2018)

The impacts of racism not only affect the agency of current community leaders but also, as Ruge

suggests, future leaders who are being taught their roles and responsibilities through the white

savior complex.

Racialized stereotypes, as discussed by Adichie, dehumanize Brown and Black

individuals through othering processes (Loseke, 2007; Tatum, 1997). Social policy scholar Ruth

Lister (2004) defines othering as a "process of differentiation and demarcation, by which the line

is drawn between 'us' and 'them' - between the more and the less powerful- and through which

social distance is established and maintained"(p. 101). This us and them dichotomy maintains the

server-served juxtaposition of the white savior complex along racialized lines.

Dehistoricization & Depoliticization

Communication and cultural studies authors, Danielle Endres and Mary Gould, contribute

to critical perspectives of whiteness through their framing of whiteness theory within the context

of service-learning (2009). Whiteness theory provides a lens for examining how white savior

narratives position whiteness as neutral, normal, and inherently good, while positioning all other

racial identities in contrast to this seemingly apolitical, dehistoricized understanding of whiteness

(hooks, 1992; Kivel, 2017; Tatum, 1997). Ann Green, employing a whiteness theory lens,

contends whiteness "is not a neutral construct, it is a position" (2003, p. 290). Similarly, cultural

critic Henry Giroux makes the point that whiteness is constructed to mask its power and

privilege (Giroux, 1997, p. 292). Whiteness theory repositions whiteness as a political reality,

thus exposing it as a strategy of othering to maintain white supremacy.

The white savior narrative requires the othering process in order to position white

dominant society as the "saviors" to the "less fortunate racial others." Depoliticizing and

de-historicizing the white savior narrative permits a situation where the racial "other" appears to be naturally the less fortunate person in need of saving while the white person is naturally the charitable savior. Instead of placing conversations of race within a sociohistorical context that acknowledges the harm caused by paternalistic practices of colonialism and misuse of foreign intervention in the Global South, critical interrogations of whiteness enable us to examine how and for what purposes dominant white society positions whiteness as neutral and racial inequality as a static reality that will always be the status quo (Flaherty, 2016; Freire, 1970).

When race relations are historically contextualized, a very different understanding of who is being served and who is serving emerges. bell hooks analyzes the relationship between Black women and white women through a servant-served paradigm where there is a hierarchical, power-based relationship between the two groups; Black women are the servants and white women are the served (hooks, 1994, p. 94). Historically, this has existed within the context of domestic labor and the role Black women have held as servants to white families. In the present-day, hooks argues this servant-served relationship continues with white women expecting Black women to serve their desires for knowledge about racism in order to advance their own careers. Meanwhile, Black women continue to be exploited and white women continue to reap the benefits of the emotional, intellectual, and physical labor of Black women (hooks, 1994, p. 103-106). The analysis of the servant-served paradigm offered by hooks re-historicizes race relations and paves the way for acknowledging the historical and present-day harm that continues to be done.

By neglecting to acknowledge the historical harm caused by white saviorism and the harm that continues to be done, white individuals' emotional desires continue to be valued more

than the physical, material, and psychological harm done to Brown and Black individuals

(Aronson, 2017; Cole, 2012; Flaherty, 2016). Illustrating this, Teju Cole points out, "Africa

serves as a backdrop for fantasies of conquest and heroism" (Cole, 2012). Through

homogenizing and reducing an entire continent of people to one single narrative as described by

Adichie, white saviorism centers white people's emotional desires for oversimplified solutions

that emphasize the need for their presence as servers in Brown and Black communities. Flaherty

adds to this by stating charity efforts emphasize individual charitable actions as opposed to

critical thinking and systemic solutions. By focusing on the individual, emotional reactions to

human suffering are put at the forefront of the conversation (Flaherty, 2016, p. 32, 50). It is

through this charity framework, the narratives not only serve to perpetuate the need for external

forces to save the day, but also to satisfy the emotional needs of white individuals (Aronson,

2017).

     Dehistoricization serves as a form of oppression in and of itself and it shapes the way

white individuals understand the answer to society's current injustices. Removing the historical

context silences approaches to addressing injustice, such as racial reparations, that emphasize

healing the harm caused by white supremacy. Instead, white-led charity efforts are emphasized.

Dehistoricization erases the historical harm committed by white individuals against communities

of color in order to preserve whiteness as inherently good. Speaking to this, Cole raises the point,

"There is an expectation that we can talk about sins but no one must be identified as a sinner"

(Cole, 2012). If we do not name the sinner(s) throughout history who have caused significant

harm, it is more difficult to heal the wounds of historical wrongdoing and eliminate the remnants

of this wrongdoing embedded in our current systems.

Further building upon Cole's reflection on the lack of acknowledgement of responsibility for harm caused by the white savior complex, Flaherty contends white savior narratives elevate stories of white people 'saving' formerly colonized countries. Simultaneously, these narratives neglect to reckon with the history of colonial exploitation that has resulted in inequality in the first place (2016, p 40). Similarly, education scholar Brittany Aronson emphasizes the roles of settler colonialism and white supremacy in creating conditions of inequality are left out of the conversation in order to preserve the justification for external intervention (2017, p. 37).

Social justice activist and educator Paul Kivel (2017) also discusses the role white savior narratives have played in attempts to justify centuries of white supremacy. He discusses how deeply these narratives are built into the United States' historical fabric. Examples include stories from Columbus and the Founding Fathers to contemporary video game superheroes. Kivel asserts the narratives are always centering "White men and Western Civilization who protect the family/town/nation/women/children/Western Civilization from dangerous others" (Kivel, 2017, p. 136). These historical narratives, both at the time of their creation as well as in present-day retelling, are employed to justify domination. It is important to politicize these narratives and reflect on the purposes they serve in upholding white supremacy.

Emotionality & Motivations

Historical and present-day narratives inform our understandings of race, regardless of whether or not they explicitly use the terms "Black," "Brown," "white," or other racial group words. Building upon Tatum and Loseke's work on how we develop our sense of racial meanings and responsibilities, social justice education scholar and consultant Keith Edwards (2006) suggests our sense of identity informs our responses to the world and our motivations. It

is crucial to understand motivations and expectations because the motivations people have can lead to differences in effectiveness, consistency, outcome, and sustainability (Edwards, 2006, p. 39). The white savior mentality revolves around an emotional experience and a desire to receive an emotional reward for "doing good." If white individuals are not aware of the systemic nature of oppression or the role of whiteness in that system, the emotions of guilt, anger, and anxiety arise and result in paternalistic approaches to "doing good" (Edwards, 2006, p. 45). Philosopher Shannon Sullivan also contends emotions play a critical role in shaping our sense of self and influence our judgements and responses to the world (Sullivan, 2014, p. 118). The emotional complexity of the white savior mentality cannot be disconnected from how white individuals make sense of their identity and their roles and responsibilities in society.

In his conceptual model for aspiring social justice ally development, Edwards employs the term "aspiring allies for altruism" to describe those who "see members of the subordinate group as the sole victims of oppression and do this work *for* them" (2006, p. 50). The white savior mentality is shaped by a desire to feel good doing something *for* another. Edwards argues although this could lead to positive gains in the short term, paternalistic approaches result in further reproducing systems of oppression (p. 50). Kivel also elaborates on this idea suggesting if approaches to racial justice work only emphasize the costs of racism to people of color, white people will base their work solely on helping people of color (2017, p. 131).

Charity & The White Savior Complex

Aspiring allies for altruism are more committed to charity-oriented solutions than investing time and energy into developing the understanding of root causes needed for identifying systemic solutions to racial inequality. White supremacy requires charity-oriented

solutions to maintain white control over Brown and Black communities. The white savior

complex is deeply grounded in external entities, specifically white-led institutions and

organizations, working in oppressed Brown and Black communities to solve problems as

opposed to communities themselves being provided with the resources and tools they need to

identify and build the solutions on their own terms. This approach is not only an issue because it

de-historicizes the reason for the problem in the first place, which is most often the result of the

oppression committed by white institutions, but also it is designed to maintain power and

privilege for white individuals (Cole, 2012; Flaherty, 2016). Without white saviorism, whiteness

loses its power and grip over Brown and Black communities who are represented as incapable of

helping themselves. Additionally, white saviorism, in failing to address the root causes of racial

inequality, continues to marginalize Brown and Black communities by cutting off access to

opportunity – economically, politically, and socially.

The vast majority of white individuals carrying out roles created within white savior

complex structures are not ill-intentioned and many are not even aware of how their very

presence in Brown and Black communities can be harmful. In a white supremacist society, where

whiteness is normalized into dominant culture and historical wrongdoing is denied, white

individuals are able to navigate the world without being forced to acknowledge the harm they

inflict on Brown and Black communities. If whiteness is always presented as benign and

benevolent, this representation neglects to acknowledge how this very representation posits

danger to Brown and Black communities (hooks, 1992, p. 175). In order to create a culture where

white individuals genuinely believe they are doing good while actually doing harm, white savior

narratives are embedded with symbolic codes that position inequality as status quo and reality as

static (Flaherty, 2016; Freire, 1970).

When reality is presented as static and fixed, people feel as if their only option is to adapt (Freire, 1970, p. 139). If inequality is presented as an unchanging reality, individuals are more likely to respond with a charity approach that will neglect to address root causes (Flaherty, 2016, p. 23). Teju Cole writes, "What innocent heroes don't always understand is they play a useful role for people who have much more cynical motives. The white savior industrial complex is a valve for releasing the unbearable pressures that build in a system built on pillage" (2012). The institutional level of white saviorism is not about individual intentions, it is about how individual intentions are used to maintain systems of oppression. In order to dismantle the white savior industrial complex (Cole, 2012), our current systems of oppression must be presented as a problem that individuals are capable of transforming (Freire, 1970). This approach enables those with good intentions to channel their desire to do good into eliminating inequality instead of maintaining it.

Resisting White Saviorism

Despite the power and persistence of white saviorism in upholding systems of white supremacy, grassroots movements led by Brown and Black individuals are challenging white saviorism and demanding those who are most directly impacted are at the center of decision-making processes regarding matters that impact their lives. This approach is grounded in a firm belief in self-determination as a guiding principle. Teju Cole emphasizes this by stating, "There is the idea that those who are being helped ought to be consulted over the matters that concern them" (Cole, 2012). From activists with the Black Lives Matter movement to disability rights activists, respecting the agency of people in their own lives is essential to the work of

dismantling systems of oppression. This presents a fundamental challenge to savior mentalities because it resists the idea that people are incapable of "saving" themselves and that they are in need of saving. Self-determination proposes that those who are most directly impacted will be the most effective at determining sustainable solutions to the unjust systems impacting their lives. Movements such as Black Lives Matter, the disability rights movement, and Indigenous Peoples Movements across the world are all strong examples of activists advancing the work of centering the voices of those most directly impacted in leading the work. These movements have prioritized the idea that the process of how justice is achieved is central to the larger vision of liberation.

The Role of White Individuals in Racial Justice Work

So what does this mean for the role of white people in the struggle for racial justice? Alicia Garza, co-founder of Black Lives Matter argues "We say you should have deep conversations and deep work in your own community, mobilize and galvanize people to make that commitment. Give some direction to other people like you who want to do the right thing" (as cited in Flaherty, 2016, p. 199). Keith Edwards provides direction to other white people through his discussion of what it means to be an "ally for social justice." According to Edwards, allies for social justice are those individuals who are allies to an issue and who believe in working *with* members of the target group as opposed to *for* (2006, p. 47). Further building upon what it means to be a white individual working for racial justice, Kivel contends approaches to racial justice work must emphasize that everyone has a tremendous stake in building a more racially just society (2017, p. 131). This moves the motivation of racial justice work toward working with Brown and Black people for a *mutual interest* in a more inclusive and equitable

society. bell hooks also asserts there must be a mutual recognition of racism's impact on both

those who are dominated and those who dominate in order for the approach to work effectively

towards racial justice (1992, p. 28).

In order to work *with* as opposed to *for,* white people must recognize and respect the

dignity and abilities of Brown and Black people. If white individuals fail to do so, we will

continue to operate from a savior approach that only emphasizes the agency and humanity of

white people and continues to dehumanize Brown and Black people. Freire argues this belief in

the oppressed individuals' abilities to transform reality is connected to trust and viewing people

not as things, but as human beings capable of reason (1970). Further, Freire offers the

perspective of authentic help, which suggests all involved help each other mutually- thus moving

away from the server-served juxtaposition (1983).

To work towards being an ally for social justice, both Kim Case (2012) and Brittany

Aronson (2017)'s education research, in agreement with Beverly Tatum's work, suggest white

individuals need support in unlearning racist ideologies. In her study on supporting white women

in unlearning racism, Case argues white women who are involved in active self-reflection on

racism can begin to view the world in a way that no longer hides whiteness but instead highlights

white privilege (2012, p. 79). Aronson's work on educating individuals about white saviorism

and white privilege emphasizes this as well, suggesting the importance of connecting

conversations about white privilege to white supremacy (2017, p. 51). Both of their arguments

underscore the importance of providing white individuals with a new critical lens for unpacking

the world's injustices, moving away from color-blind and solely individual understandings of

racism to an awareness of whiteness as systemic oppression.

The work of unlearning racism is a lifelong process (Case, 2012; Freire, 1970; Latta, Kruger, Payne, Weaver, & VanSickle, 2018; Straubhaar, 2015; Tatum, 1997). White individuals need to develop an ability to view the journey as never-ending by gaining a sense of perseverance, humility, and sustainability in racial justice work. It is essential to support white individuals with the tools necessary to stay on the lifelong journey of unlearning racism. This study aims to advance knowledge on how white individuals develop critical consciousness of white saviorism. In deepening understandings of the journeys of white individuals developing critical consciousness of white saviorism, I aim to contribute to findings that will hopefully support others in the process of unlearning racism and in building our collective capacity to more effectively eliminate structural inequality.

Methods

This qualitative, hermeneutic phenomenological study consisted of seven total interviews. Hermeneutic phenomenology is "the interpretation of the meaning and significances of one's experience with a phenomenon" (Campbell, 2011, p.4). I selected this methodological approach because I am interested in understanding how white individuals develop meaning and significance from their awareness of white saviorism and the impact it has had on their lives. Phenomenological research seeks to answer what interviewees have experienced in terms of the phenomenon and what factors have influenced or affected their experience with the phenomenon (Campbell, 2011, p. 5; Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 61). My epistemological position regarding this study is grounded in a belief in the great importance of understanding phenomena from those who are experiencing them directly and through learning from how people process through their experiences.

This study was approved by the institutional review board at Merrimack College. All study participants signed an informed consent form prior to their participation in the interview. The Informed Consent Form (appendix A) outlined potential risks, benefits, procedures, and confidentiality measures associated with the study.

Researcher Identity

The phenomenological approach requires the researcher to bracket their research bias and expectations (Campbell, 2011, p. 4; Groenewald, 2004, p.50). I am a U.S. born, temporarily able-bodied, middle class, white, cisgender woman. I was raised Catholic and grew up being very active in the Catholic church up until my first year of college. Over the past few years, I have become increasingly aware of how both white savior narratives have constructed my own white savior mentality as well as how the white savior complex has privileged me and provided the structure for me to be where I am today. My own critical reflection on my journey in developing critical consciousness of white saviorism has led me to this study. Additionally, my work in the field of community engagement in higher education, the nonprofit sector, as well as K12 after-school programming has informed my understanding of the contexts in the U.S. in which white saviorism operates. bell hooks, in *Teaching to Transgress*, writes "When our lived experience of theorizing is fundamentally linked to processes of self-recovery, of collective liberation, no gap exists between theory and practice" (1994). My own personal journey with becoming more critically aware of white saviorism has informed how I theorize about this topic and the actions I take in my research.

The phenomenological approach seeks to "describe the essence of the experience" from the interviewee's perspective (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 134). In order to attempt to

bracket my biases throughout the study, I kept memos when I noticed my biases arising. I continuously returned to and reviewed the participants' direct quotes while analyzing the data instead of solely my coding notes to ensure I was centering their voices and perspectives in developing the themes for my findings.

Participant Selection

My interviewees were selected through extreme/deviant purposive sampling. I chose the extreme/deviant purposive sampling method because I needed to produce a targeted sample of individuals who had written and/ or spoken about white saviorism in a public manner, which could not be produced by a probability sampling method. For the purpose of this study, I needed to select a sample that had in some capacity demonstrated an awareness of white saviorism publicly as my questions revolved around how their awareness of white saviorism developed and how it informs their actions. I selected participants on the specific criteria that, (a) they had publicly written or spoken about white saviorism in some capacity and, (b) they self-identified as white. I selected my list of interviewees to invite through inputting the terms "white savior," "white saviorism," "white savior complex," "white savior mentality," "white savior narratives," and "white savior industrial complex" into Google, Google Scholar, and academic search databases. I also searched "white savior" in the Apple Podcast App Store. I recruited participants by contacting them via email. Appendix C is the email template I utilized to invite the selected individuals to participate in the study. I contacted thirteen individuals based on contact information publicly available online and seven consented to participate.

Participants

The participants selected for this study all identified themselves as white. Five

participants are women and two are men. One participant identified themself as racially white

and ethnically Latina. One participant identified themself as Jewish. Four participants were born

and are currently living in the United States. One participant was born outside of the United

States and is currently living in the United States. Two participants born inside the United States

are currently living outside of the country. Participants' highest educational degree attainment

included one high school diploma, one Bachelor degree, two Master's degrees and three PhDs.

Participants come from a range of educational backgrounds including teacher education, clinical

social work, higher education, nonprofit management, anthropology, sociology, philosophy,

archaeology, consumer science, and African Studies. The participants work in a variety of

settings and roles in the areas of international development, educational and organizational

consulting, community organizing and activism, higher education, K-12 education, and nonprofit

settings. All of the participants have been given pseudonyms to protect their confidentiality.

Data Collection

Prior to conducting the interviews with the participants, I tested the Interview Protocol

(Appendix B) on two individuals to test the software and make sure the questions were

accessible. After testing the protocol, I scheduled the interviews with the participants. Each

participant was interviewed once for approximately one hour. Participants were provided with

the option of conducting the interview via phone call or video chat. One interview was conducted

via phone call and six interviews were conducted via video chat. Interview responses were

recorded and transcribed verbatim for use in the data analysis process. Interview transcripts were

returned to the participants to check for accuracy. Participants returned the interview transcripts

with minor edits pertaining, for the most part, to corrections to names of people and places, and

clarifying meanings of potentially unclear wording. The revised transcripts were incorporated

into the data set.

Data Analysis

I began the data analysis process by printing out the interview transcripts and creating a

large matrix on a wall with the interviewee assigned codes as the rows and the interview

questions as the columns. I conducted the first round of coding by highlighting the similarities

and differences across participant responses. I then identified topical markers and began to

compile the highlighted quotes into emerging codes in a notebook. After recording the quotes

within their assigned coding categories, I reviewed the codes to eliminate overlap and I tagged

the refined coding categories on the wall with color-coded post-it notes. I then recorded the

quotes into one Word document within their assigned categories and I reviewed them again to

identify themes that represented commonalities across the responses. After, I returned to my

theoretical frameworks and identified where the themes aligned with my theories and where gaps

presented themselves within the theoretical frameworks I had pulled from in my review of the

literature. I identified white identity development theory as a theoretical framework that would

address a gap I had found in my organization of the findings. I then reviewed white identity

development theory and refined my themes to determine how they aligned with the stages of

Helms' white identity development model and areas where my findings did not align. After, I

identified the stages I saw emerge from the findings and restructured my themes to align with the

stages that emerged. Finally, I sorted my themes into three groups: expected codes/themes, surprising codes/themes, and unusual codes/themes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 197).

Findings

The participants' responses illustrate white identity development informs the development of critical consciousness of white saviorism. To further elaborate on the connectedness of white identity development and the development of critical consciousness of white saviorism, I structure my presentation of the findings within psychologist Janet Helms' white identity development model (1990). Helms' model focuses on the process white individuals go through to develop a positive white racial identity. She argues that in order to develop a healthy white identity, white individuals must overcome one or more of the three types of racism: individual, institutional, cultural (p. 49). She goes on to state, "Additionally, he or she must accept his or her own Whiteness, the cultural implications of being White, and define a view of Self as a racial being that does not depend on the perceived superiority of one racial group over another" (p. 49). Although my findings do not conclude it is possible to overcome racism, I find Helms' connection between white racial identity development and an understanding of the three types of racism to be helpful for thinking about how white individuals' understandings of the three levels of white saviorism inform their development of critical consciousness of white saviorism. With this in mind, I found through my findings that white identity development informs the development of critical consciousness of white saviorism, a reality that manifests within all three types of racism.

Helms' white identity development model provides a structure for presenting the findings in the following ways: by organizing how the participants learned racism and meanings of

whiteness within what Helms' refers to as the contact status, how they worked to unlearn and

relearn white saviorism and meanings of whiteness within the disintegration and

pseudo-independent statuses, and how they are working to relearn their racial identity and their

role in racial justice work within the immersion/emersion and autonomy statuses. I am not

including Helms' reintegration status because it is not present in the participants' descriptions of

their experiences.

        Helms' white racial identity development model influenced my creation of figure 2 to

illustrate participant descriptions of the process white individuals go through as they are

developing critical consciousness of white saviorism. Overall, there are several commonalities

between Helms' stages and those I draw from in the findings of this study, but there are key

distinctions where I complexify and extend Helms' model. I elaborate on these in the discussion

section.
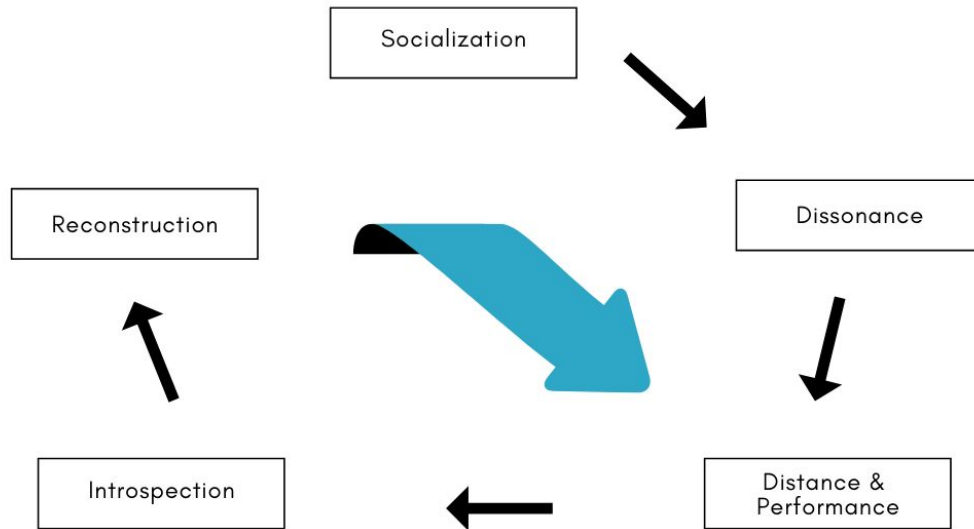
Figure 2

Socialization

According to Helms' model, the first stage of white racial identity development is the

contact status. Helms describes the contact status as a person who "typically approaches the

world with a color-blind or cultureless perspective and general naivete about how race and

racism's impact on herself or himself as well as other people" (1990, p. 68). For this study, I

identified the first theme/stage of white development of critical consciousness of white saviorism

as *socialization*. For the purposes of this study, I define socialization as the process of learning

social meanings, roles, and responsibilities ascribed to socially constructed categories, such as

race and gender, in a given context, which inform understandings of one's sense of self and

others. At this stage the socialization process is implicit and the individual is not consciously aware of how their socialization is impacting their beliefs and behaviors.

I identified this theme after coding the interview transcripts and later connecting the participants' quotes back to racial formation theory and white identity development theory. I coded socialization as a theme based on the following: participant direct usage of the term "socialization," participant descriptions of how they or others learned meanings of whiteness and white saviorism, Helms' contact status notion of levels of awareness of one's whiteness, and Omi and Winant's racial formation theory notion of racial roles and responsibilities learned through racial representations.

All of the participants' responses reflect the important role of socialization in informing racial identity development. Responses illustrated that white individuals learn meanings of whiteness through the white saviorism embedded in dominant socialization. Additionally, they emphasized that socialization shapes understandings of race often without the individual being consciously aware of what they are being taught about racial categories. One interviewee, Sara, shared, "I hold the belief that white individuals are socialized into their whiteness and so with that comes this idea that many of our students don't even realize this attachment of whiteness and goodness." John extended this by discussing the role dominant Christianity has in teaching racialized roles and responsibilities. John stated,

> It comes from a really foundational concept in dominant Christianity that Christians have
> been given the mandate by God, as stated in the New Testament, to go out and save
> everybody in the world...therefore every Christian has a responsibility to save anyone

they care about...we are all socialized into a particular attitude around that- that white

people know best and should be in charge.

Six of the participants elaborated on the ways individuals are socialized to think about the

meanings of whiteness without that socialization always explicitly naming whiteness as a racial

category.

One participant who was born and grew up outside of the United States, Mia, shared a

perspective that demonstrates the important role of sociopolitical context in white identity

development.

I certainly thought about being white for a lot longer because it is such a marked

category in South Africa. The literature on whiteness in America and Britain is so

different in that it kind of calls out the need to declare whiteness as a marked category

because of the power it has in being unmarked. That is not something white South

Africans grow up with. They grow up with this sense of privilege that is unmarked but

not a sense of whiteness that is unmarked.

For her white identity development, there was a distinction between when she thought about

being white and when she developed a political understanding of her whiteness. Yet, because she

grew up during apartheid, she knew to an extent that her whiteness gave her benefits others who

were not white did not have.

But I realized at the time that as a 13 year old with zero political understanding, I knew

enough to know I could go into the wrong carriage but my friends couldn't come to the

whites-only carriage. I couldn't have articulated that, we certainly didn't talk about it, but

we were really aware that that was within the realm of possibility...Just as a general

awareness of my privilege, I couldn't have articulated it.

Sara, who identifies as racially white and ethnically Latina, asserted "whiteness is not as

monolithic as we think it is." Similar to Mia's childhood recollection, she also recalled a

childhood memory where she was aware being white had benefits because of what she had

learned through her socialization around whiteness. One memory she shared was of her trying to

prove to a white peer during fourth grade that even though her skin was darker during the

summer time because of the sun, she was still white. She reflected, "I was in fourth grade. I had

already learned it was better to be white by that age." This impacted her identity development

and made it difficult for her to see herself as both ethnically Latina and racially white. She

reflected, "I have been socialized into whiteness but my whiteness is more complicated and I

pushed aside one part of myself because of that." Sara's reflection on her socialization reflects

the ways in which racial projects are internalized and thus inform racial identity development.

Dissonance

The second stage in Helms' model is the disintegration stage. Helms describes the

disintegration stage as a "conscious, though conflicted, acknowledgement of one's Whiteness.

Moreover, it triggers the recognition of moral dilemmas associated with being White" (1990, p.

58). In this study, I identified the second theme/stage as *dissonance*. For the purpose of this

study, I define dissonance as the experiencing of discomfort when confronted with information

that fundamentally challenges one's sense of self and understanding of the world. At this stage,

the individual is becoming aware of white privilege and beginning to accept that it exists. I

identified this theme after coding the interview transcripts and later connecting the participants'

quotes back to white identity development theory. I coded dissonance as a theme based on the

following: participants' descriptions of the emotional discomfort experienced by themselves or

others when beginning to develop critical awareness of whiteness and/or white saviorism,

references to the challenges of separating intent from impact, and how this is tied to the ways

white saviorism informs sense of self.

      All of the participants shared a series of experiences that informed their early process of

learning about the political realities of whiteness and their own white privilege. None of the

participants felt it was one specific moment but instead a series of different experiences and

encounters. When I asked participants about how they began to understand white saviorism and

who/what has influenced this understanding, they all spoke about both academic and

nonacademic sources. Two participants mentioned the role of Peggy McIntosh's "Unpacking the

Invisible Knapsack" article on white privilege as one of the first steps to beginning to understand

whiteness. Five participants spoke to the role of social media, particularly Instagram and Twitter,

in introducing them to white saviorism from the perspectives of Brown and Black individuals,

such as Teju Cole. Two participants mentioned Teju Cole's "The White Savior Industrial

Complex" published in *The Atlantic*, as an extension of his tweets. Three participants brought up

Beverly Tatum's "Why are all the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?" Sara spoke

about a racial narrative assignment assigned in her critical race theory course which prompted

her to think about her own racial narrative and how it was very helpful in her own identity

development process.

      The use of parody emerged as one area where there were some differences in opinion

regarding whether it was helpful or harmful. Sara shared that parody helped her develop her

awareness of white saviorism. Annie stated that parody helped her process through her own

white saviorism. Sara and John sent me the same recently created parody of white saviorism that

came out after our interviews. Contrastingly, Mia contested, "I think the white savior, I mean in

becoming a joke and a parody of itself, I've tried to argue that really domesticates the critique in

a way that allows people to think of themselves as critical of the white savior complex while also

thinking of themselves as outside of it."

Six participants' responses reflected how the process for beginning to understand white

privilege connects to the development of a critical awareness of white saviorism. Some spoke

from personal experience with regard to their own process, while others spoke more about what

they have observed other white individuals go through emotionally during this process of

beginning to develop critical awareness of whiteness and white saviorism. All participants'

responses reflected the discomfort that arises when one begins to grapple with what it means to

do good and be white, what one's beliefs are, and what one's role is in the world as a white

person after having to come to terms with a reality that produces profound cognitive dissonance.

John reflected on how dominant Christianity's emphasis on *intent* as opposed to *impact* is part of

what leads to emotional discomfort.

> It makes it very difficult for us to listen to criticism about that because it makes us feel
>
> like we are being told we are bad people and bad people go to hell, they are on the wrong
>
> side of the cosmic struggle. That's why our intent becomes more important than our
>
> impact. Because "God" judges us on our intent and rewards us on our intent and not on
>
> our impact.

Similarly, Mia stated, "That's really hard to untangle because it really does come from a place of good intent and well-meaning and so it's really complicated on how you help them unbraid intentions from impact." Additionally, Sara shared "When you try to unpack a saviorist mentality, that attacks the goodness of your nature. That also comes with white fragility and emotionality." These statements suggest the process of developing critical awareness of white saviorism comes with strong, uncomfortable emotional reactions to information that in some cases completely challenges one's entire understanding of their purpose and their role in the world.

Distance & Performance

Helms' next stage is the pseudo-independent stage. Describing this stage, Helms writes, "though the person in the Pseudo-Independent stage is abandoning the belief in White superiority/ Black inferiority, he or she may still behave in ways that unwittingly perpetuate this belief system" (1990, p. 61). Helms also states, "Consequently, the Pseudo-Independent person may not feel entirely comfortable with her or his White identity, but overidentification with Blacks is also not likely to be very comfortable" (1990, p. 62). I identified the third theme/stage as *distance and performance*. For this study, I define distance as engaging in behavior that attempts to separate oneself from others one is perceiving as less far along in their understanding of whiteness, racism and/or white saviorism. This distancing behavior often results in performance. I define performance as utilizing racial inequality as a platform to portray oneself as a good white person, while still maintaining a superiority mindset. These behaviors are a way of coping with the dissonance being experienced. This terminology came directly from the study participants and the definitions for these words were developed out of participants' responses.

I identified this theme after coding the interview transcripts and later connecting the participants' quotes back to white identity development theory. I coded distance and performance as a theme based on the following: participants' direct usage of the terms distance and performance, descriptions of not seeing oneself as implicated, descriptions of calling out behavior that is rooted in a superiority mentality, removing the self from conversations about whiteness, racism, and white saviorism, and comments regarding the challenges of supporting other white individuals in developing critical consciousness of white saviorism.

Tim and John both shared their perspectives on the shift that takes place as individuals move from beginning to come to terms with this new understanding of white saviorism towards trying to distance themselves from other white people who they perceive as less far along than them. At this stage, white individuals commit to learning more about whiteness and white saviorism, but feel the new knowledge they are developing makes them superior to others who they perceive as ignorant or less "woke."

Tim suggests the act of distancing oneself from other white people is a reaction to the shame and discomfort an individual is experiencing internally. He pointed out, "For white people, they remind you of previous versions of you who have said those things and thought those things and you are embarrassed or you are ashamed and you want as much distance from them and you want to prove it to everybody else and just denigrate them." His response suggests this is the result of a difficulty in working through one's own emotional discomfort of shame and fragility resulting from being made aware of past mistakes, internalized biases, and potential harm done to others.

John also reflects on this distancing behavior as he elaborates, "There's ways in progressive circles and a culture of calling people out and being politically correct that can actually amplify that savior mentality and reinforce the sense of being missionaries or proselytizing for social justice from a superior point of view." Tim refers to this kind of behavior as "performativity...performing good whiteness." These distancing and performance behaviors suggest an individual at this stage in their white identity development is struggling with the discomfort so much that they have difficulty acknowledging how they are still impacted by racism and white saviorism. Mia points out, "I think when we talk about whiteness it is often in a way that allows people to not see themselves as implicated." Additionally, she stressed, "To pretend you are somehow outside of it is the biggest mistake a lot of good people make." This stage of white identity development is marked by an emphasis on understanding white saviorism outside oneself, and also a struggle with coming to terms with one's own whiteness and internalized white saviorism.

Introspection

The next stage of Helms' model is immersion/emersion. Helms describes this stage as when the white individual is "searching for the answers to the questions: 'Who am I racially?' and 'Who do I want to be?' and 'Who are you really?'" (1990, p. 62). In this study, I identified the fourth theme/stage as *introspection*. For the purpose of this study, I define introspection as the process of reflecting inwards on one's own socialization, internalized biases, and racial identity. I identified this theme after coding the interview transcripts and later connecting the participants' quotes back to white identity development theory. I coded introspection as a theme

based on participants' descriptions of becoming critically aware of their own socialization and

developing the capacity to reflect on their own internalized biases.

A key aspect of this shift towards focusing internally on one's own biases is evidenced by

participants' comments on how they are now able to critically reflect on their socialization. At

this stage, individuals are still being socialized in a racist society but they are developing a new

lens to unpack this racist socialization. Sara shared, "My brain has been re-programmed and I

think about it all the time." Cara similarly reflected "It's almost like having cleaner glasses."

Further, John emphasized, "I think the core is once you understand the framework it is a question

of seeing how it is playing out currently around you." This framework and these cleaner glasses

are what has provided them with the ability to work towards developing critical consciousness of

white saviorism by being able to notice it happening around them and also within themselves.

Tim, in discussing his process of working through his biases, reflected,

> My goal is to figure out how do I get more of this stuff from the back of my head to the
>
> front of it where I am conscious of it- which sucks because it is painful and it is shame
>
> and all of that, but at least I can wrestle with it. When it is in the back of my head and I'm
>
> not conscious of it, I'm just a puppet to it.

Mia also shared how being honest about her biases is essential to her process. "Really, for me it

is accepting, not accepting that it is okay, but recognizing that racism. It is how you react to it, it

is not about denying it. It is how you act in deeply racist structures that we all live in." This

ownership of one's biases and commitment to continuous self-reflection informs their

reconstruction process.

Reconstruction

Helms' last stage is the autonomy stage. Helms describes the main goals of this stage as "internalizing, nurturing, and applying the new definition of Whiteness evolved in the earlier stages"(1990, p. 62). She also states, "Although autonomy represents the highest level of White racial identity and might be thought of as racial self-actualization or transcendence, perhaps it is best to think of it as an going process" (1990, p. 66). In this study, I identified the fifth theme/stage as *reconstruction*. For the purpose of this study, I define reconstruction as the process of continuously investing in the development of one's own capacity to unlearn internalized biases and to relearn one's racial identity and role in racial justice work. As someone is continuously investing in developing their own capacity, they also support other white individuals in unlearning and relearning**.** The emphasis is on healing the harm that has been done and to prevent future harm. They are working to heal the harm that has been caused to themselves and to the world as a result of living in a racist society. This is necessary because it fundamentally challenges the practice of centering white emotional desires over the explicit harm caused by white saviorism. For example, the many lives that have been taken as a result of sending untrained volunteers to perform the work of professional doctors, a practice that would be unacceptable in a wealthy, white community in the United States. At the same time, they are committed to learning their roles as white individuals in racial justice work to prevent future harm to all members of society, most importantly Brown and Black individuals. The focus is on structural-level change because that is the way to eliminate the power imbalances resulting in harm.

I identified this theme after coding the interview transcripts and later connecting the participants' quotes back to white identity development theory. I coded this theme based on the following: participants' usage of the term "healing," participants' discussions of the process as never-ending and viewing themselves as unfinished, and participants' discussions of the current actions they take to continue to learn, seek accountability, and sustain their work.

All of the participants stressed the importance of committing to a lifelong journey and recognized the process is ongoing. Tim specifically referred to this process as "healing" from white supremacy, our racism, and our whiteness. He shared, "What I know now is that will never be undone – no matter how much I read, no matter how much I work, no matter how I reflect I'm never going to be fully done and free from that." Further, he reflected on his process of how he reacts now when he makes mistakes and notices his internalized racism influencing his behavior. "I notice it when I do it, I notice it more when I think or feel it before it gets out, when it gets out, I can see it and I can catch myself, I feel really bad. I recover more quickly. It's less an attack on my moral being and my moral character...I recover more than I previously did." This reflection suggests the stages are not linear, but rather individuals may go through all stages and find themselves falling back into a previous habit and needing to work through their biases and emotions to continue on their journey with reconstruction. The tendency to fall back into previous habits, such as distancing and performance behaviors, is reflected by the large center arrow in figure 2.

Participants' responses indicate once white individuals recognize they must continue this work for the rest of their lives, they commit to participating in critical spaces with both people of color as well as white individuals who will challenge and support them in their journey. All

participants also emphasized a distinction between the role of white individuals and people of

color in supporting them in their healing journey. Although the manner in which they

distinguished this role appeared more clear for some than others, there was an acknowledgement

in all of their responses that there is a difference. Describing the importance of doing this work

with other white individuals, Tim contended,

> I think for white people to do our work with other white people is really important so we
>
> don't place that burden on people of color- as long as you have white people who really
>
> will help you do the work, not just comfort you and affirm your white saviorism or your
>
> denial.

Similarly, Meagan raised,

> If you are white it is important to have other white people to say 'Okay how are we
>
> working on this together' because we don't need people of color to be the only people
>
> that are educating. I think it is important for white people to educate each other but to
>
> continue to recognize how do you understand the experiences of individuals of color and
>
> their understanding.

John emphasized this work cannot be done solely in the company of only other white

individuals. He stressed,

> We can't do that alone because we don't see ourselves that clearly. So it's really
>
> important we are listening to those around us who come from marginalized communities
>
> and identities in our society who can name that- how it works and how it shows up.

Describing her process for listening to voices who have been historically excluded from

dominant mediums, Meagan offered, "I'm continuously trying to find voices of color, Black

women voices, to be able to say what are you saying and how are you talking about white

saviorism, all of this, just your identities?"

While seeking out these critical spaces, all of the participants shared they are also

creating critical spaces to support other white individuals in developing a critical awareness of

white saviorism and/or whiteness and white privilege. All of the participants spoke to the ways

they support other white individuals within the context of their own work, whether that be

through consulting for nonprofits, K-12 schools, higher education institutions, community

groups, or mentoring individuals and groups of white individuals who seek to engage in racial

justice work. There were numerous ways they detailed their involvement in supporting other

white individuals while they continue on their own journeys towards developing critical

consciousness of white saviorism. Describing how supporting others informs his own work, Tim

reflected,

> To be honest, everytime I present on that article, everytime I present on these advanced
>
> social justice strategies for social change, I have to do better and it is a constant reminder
>
> of engaging in that. Being invited to present, or teach, or do a keynote on some of these
>
> things always is a reminder where I need to do my own work.

In addition, all of the participants' responses stressed the importance of focusing their

actions on changing the structures and policies that uphold white saviorism. Mia illustrated this

by stating, "And so what I fight for, work towards, is changing, always changing those systems

and structures that I operate and work in as opposed to ever trying to save anybody." This marks

a fundamental shift from viewing one's role as a white person to save Brown and Black people

through acts of charity towards changing structural realities and understanding the importance of working through one's own white saviorism in order to also support others in doing the same.

None of the participants shared they no longer experience discomfort; rather, they emphasized that their emotions still often get in the way of their ability to do their racial justice work effectively. Yet, they continue to go through the process of reconstruction. Tim suggested the focus becomes "How do we continue to do this work so that we are more better, more often?"

Discussion

The findings align with previous findings in the existing literature regarding white identity development (Helms, 1990; Tatum, 1997), white fragility and the centering of white emotional desires (Aronson, 2017; Cole, 2012; DiAngelo, 2011; Edwards, 2006; Flaherty, 2016), the impact of white individuals' lack of structural and historical understandings of whiteness (Aronson, 2017; Cole, 2012; Flaherty, 2016; Freire, 1970; hooks, 1992; hooks, 1994; Kivel, 2017; Tatum, 1997), unlearning racism as a lifelong process (Case, 2012; Freire, 1970; Latta et al, 2018; Straubhaar, 2015; Tatum, 1997) and the roles of white individuals and Black and Brown individuals in racial justice work (Aronson, 2017; Case, 2012; Edwards, 2006; Flaherty, 2016; Kivel, 2017). However, this study's findings further the current literature on white identity development, whiteness, and white saviorism by extending knowledge of white identity development and the impact this has on how white individuals develop critical consciousness of white saviorism.

This study contributes to research and knowledge on whiteness, white identity development, and white saviorism by applying Omi and Winant's racial formation theory and

Helms' white identity development theory to how white individuals develop critical consciousness of white saviorism. By utilizing both theories to analyze the findings throughout my coding process, I applied the theories to see where they were helpful and how they could be complexified or extended. With regard to racial formation theory, I applied and extended the theory by looking at how white saviorism as a racial project socializes white individuals, the impact of this socialization, and how white individuals develop new lenses for becoming critically aware of this socialization.

With regard to Helms' white identity development theory, I applied, extended and complexified her model through my findings on the ways in which ethnicity, gender, religion, nationality and class influence white identity development and the development of critical consciousness of white saviorism. Five out of seven participants mentioned that at least one of these identity categories influenced their racial identity development. This is important for considering how in the future we may think in more complex ways about whiteness and the impact of the nuances of particular sociopolitical and historical contexts on racial identity development. This is also important for how we consider the ways we might approach supporting white individuals in understanding their whiteness.

Two participants identified themselves as men. They were the only participants to explicitly discuss how their gender identity development has informed their racial identity development. This is important to note because it could potentially inform how we might utilize gender privilege as an area to further explore white privilege and the relationship between cisgender men acting from a savior mindset and white individuals acting from a savior mindset.

Religion also arose as an area of socialization influencing understandings of whiteness. This contributes to conversations regarding racial formation by exploring the potential role of religion, particularly white dominant Christianity, in constructing race within a context of white saviorism. Notably, the participant who spoke the most explicitly about the role of Christianity in white saviorism identified themself as Jewish. In considering the role of Christian socialization, particularly in the United States where Christianity is deeply embedded into dominant socialization regardless of your religious identity, it is important to recognize the role Christianity might play in white identity development. Having this understanding of the potential connections between religious socialization and identity development could assist with anticipating the potential challenges that may arise when supporting white individuals in developing critical consciousness of white saviorism.

Additionally, Tim's statement, "My formal and informal learning represents a lot of class privilege," also raises an important point about the role of class privilege in racial identity development. It begs us to consider how the amount of access to opportunity to learn how to think critically about whiteness and one's racial identity might influence racial identity development overall. No other participants addressed this in their responses, yet Tim's point does open up an important conversation about the role of class in racial identity development and the potential class barriers to developing critical consciousness within our current structure of supporting white individuals in their white identity development.

Implications & Recommendations

So what does this mean for how one might support white individuals in developing critical consciousness of white saviorism? The first implication this has for the actions one takes

to support white individuals in developing critical consciousness of white saviorism is understanding how the approach one takes should take into consideration the stage at which the individual currently presents. For example, if the individual has little to no conscious understanding of whiteness and how it operates in society as well as within themself, there must be an effort to first develop critical awareness of whiteness at the individual, cultural, and structural levels. This would include historicizing and politicizing whiteness as well as discussing the harm caused by racism. In contrast, if an individual is engaging in distancing and performance behaviors, it might be helpful to utilize supports that help the individual develop the capacity to engage in critical self-reflection on their racial identity and how their socialization impacts the way they approach addressing racial inequality. Additionally, it could be helpful to introduce the individual to white individuals who are at the reconstruction stage to model how to recognize one's own internalized racism and take responsibilities for one's mistakes in order to develop the capacity to critically self-reflect and view oneself as a ongoing work in progress.

Another implication is the need for supports to be available to individuals at all stages in their journey because the work is never finished. Those who are in the reconstruction stage need supports to stay committed to their journey in developing critical consciousness of white saviorism. All of the participants emphasized they continue to seek out opportunities to learn and grow in their understandings. It could be helpful to create a critical space for white individuals who are committed to continuing on their journey in developing critical consciousness of white saviorism to talk with one another and hold one another accountable throughout this ongoing process. Those in this space would need to be committed to consistently listening and seeking out perspectives of Brown and Black individuals. The participants discussed having this space

within the context of their own fields, but they did not discuss having a space explicitly

dedicated to developing critical consciousness of white saviorism. Creating a space dedicated to

developing critical consciousness of white saviorism and how it manifests within the context of a

wide array of fields could be helpful in supporting individuals in collaboratively identifying what

kinds of supports may be the most helpful within the contexts of their work and how they can

work towards structural level change.

Limitations

One limitation to this study was the limited amount of time to recruit participants and

complete the interviews. If I had more time, I would have chosen to recruit more participants and

to conduct at least two interviews with each participant as opposed to one. I believe a second

round of interviews would have provided me with an opportunity to review the interview content

with the participants and ask them to further reflect on their experiences shared during the first

interview, as well as to ask clarifying questions about particular moments and individuals they

mentioned, particularly in light of themes I saw emerging. This also would allow them time to

first reflect on their own after the conversation and after share any further thoughts that arose for

them.

Future Research

One area in need of further research is exploring the differences in opinion of the

helpfulness or harmfulness of parody in the context of conversations about white saviorism

discussed in the findings section. This is something that is worth further exploring because it has

become one of the primary ways dominant media platforms are talking about white saviorism,

particularly in the United States. Further exploring whether or not the use of parody is helpful or

harmful is important to consider in thinking about how the findings from this study are applied. Additionally, examining how the use of parody might contribute to distancing and performing behavior may also be useful.

Also, further research needs to explore white saviorism from the perspectives of Brown and Black individuals. This research should look at how Black and Brown individuals develop critical consciousness of white saviorism. Additionally, research should look at Brown and Black individuals' perspectives on the harm caused by white saviorism, how to address the harm that has already been done, and how to prevent future harm.

Future research should also further explore the role of white individuals in racial justice work. Further reflecting upon the reconstruction stage, there is a need for additional research on what exactly it means for white individuals to engage in racial justice work with regard to making changes at the individual, cultural, institutional, and systemic levels. Considering what supports are needed at the reconstruction stage, there must be a discussion regarding the ultimate goal of this work. I approach this study with a belief that the ultimate goal is to support white individuals in utilizing the critical awareness they are developing to work alongside Black and Brown individuals in transforming our structures to eliminate white privilege. Eliminating white privilege eliminates the ability for there to be a white savior complex. I chose to look at how white individuals develop critical consciousness, not just critical awareness, because it is important to identify what individuals are doing with this critical awareness. To look at what white individuals should do with this critical awareness will require the research to be directly informed by the voices of Brown and Black individuals who are the most directly harmed by white saviorism.

Lastly, this study is interdisciplinary because the complexity of the problem requires the integration of perspectives across disciplines from both inside and outside academia. Higher education scholar Ernest A. Lynton (1994) wrote on the importance of viewing knowledge beyond a one directional understanding. He argued, "knowledge does not move only from the locus of research to the place of application, from scholar to practitioner, teacher to student, expert to client. It is everywhere fed back, constantly enhanced" (p.10). Practitioners must be engaged as scholars and the traditional divide between the creators of knowledge and receivers of knowledge must be disrupted. Without this disruption, white saviorism will not be eliminated. Additionally, there is a need for conversations about white saviorism to be more deeply integrated across disciplines such as community engagement, nonprofit management, and politics and economics, to name a few examples. Community-engaged scholarship is how this one-directional flow of knowledge can be disrupted and it will be necessary in moving this research forward. Eliminating white saviorism will require chipping away at the individual, cultural, institutional, and systemic levels of racism from an interdisciplinary, multi-pronged approach. Deepening understandings of how white individuals develop critical consciousness of white saviorism is one piece in a larger puzzle of the work that must be done in order to eliminate white saviorism.

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Appendix

Appendix List

- Appendix A: Interview Informed Consent Form
- Appendix B: Interview Protocol
- Appendix C: Invitation to Participate in Study E-mail

Appendix A

315 Turnpike Street, North Andover, MA 01845 | www.merrimack.edu

Consent to Participate in Research Study

Title of Study: Working Through The Smog: How White Individuals Develop Critical Consciousness of White Saviorism
Investigators: Jamie Willer, Merrimack College
IRB Number: IRB-FY18-19-99

Introduction
- You are being asked to be in a research study of how white individuals develop critical consciousness of white saviorism.
- You were selected as a possible participant because you have confirmed via email you identify as a white individual and you have written or spoken about white saviorism in some context, academically, non-academically, or both.
- I ask that you read this form and ask any questions that you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Purpose of Study
- The purpose of the study is to contribute to understandings of how white individuals develop critical consciousness of white saviorism.
- Ultimately, this research may be published in a journal article, as part of a book, presented on at a conference, and/or shared with practitioners at various professional development and learning events.

Description of the Study Procedures
- If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following things: complete one 1-hour interview with the investigator and review the interview notes to check for accuracy. This interview can be completed via video chat or phone call, depending on what your preference is.

Risks/Discomforts of Being in this Study
- There are no reasonable foreseeable (or expected) risks. There may be unknown risks.

Benefits of Being in the Study

- There are no expected benefits to the participant.

Confidentiality
- The records of this study will be kept strictly confidential. Research records will be kept in a locked file, and/or all electronic information will be coded and secured using a password protected file. If you consent to audio or video tape recordings to be made, I will be the only one with access to them. The recordings will be saved and stored with a coded number in place of your name. I will not include any information in any report I may publish or share for educational purposes that would make it possible to identify you.

Payments or Compensation
- You will receive no payment or reimbursement for your time in this study.

Right to Refuse or Withdraw
- The decision to participate in this study is entirely up to you. You may refuse to take part in the study *at any time* without affecting your relationship with the investigator of this study, Merrimack College or any study partners. Your decision will not result in any loss or benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You have the right not to answer any single question, as well as to withdraw completely from the interview at any point during the process; additionally, you have the right to request that the interviewer not use any of your interview material.

Right to Ask Questions and Report Concerns
- You have the right to ask questions about this research study and to have those questions answered by me before, during or after the research. If you have any further questions about the study, at any time feel free to contact me, Jamie Willer at willerj@merrimack.edu or by telephone at (952)-426-2548. A summary of the results of the study will be sent to you. If you have any other concerns about your rights as a research participant that have not been answered by the investigator, you may contact the Chair of the Merrimack Institutional Review Board at (978)-837-5280 or by email at irb@merrimack.edu.
- If you have any problems or concerns that occur as a result of your participation, you can report them to the Chair of the IRB at the contact information above.

Informed Consent
This study involves audio/video recording. Please tick the appropriate box

- I am aware that my participation in this study may be recorded (video/audio) and I agree to this. However, if I feel uncomfortable at any time I can ask that the recording equipment be switched off. I understand that I can ask for a copy of my recording. I understand what will happen to the recordings once the study is finished.

- I do not agree to being audio/video recorded in this study.

After considering the above statements, I consent to my involvement in this research project.

Name: (please print): _____

Signature: _____   Date: _____

Investigator's Signature _____   Date: _____

Appendix B

Thank you for agreeing to interview with me and for taking the time to speak with me today. As mentioned in our email correspondence, the purpose of this study is to contribute to knowledge regarding the ways in which white individuals develop critical consciousness of white saviorism.

Do you have any questions about the purpose or intent of this research before we go any further?

To provide you with a brief outline of the structure of this interview, I will start by asking you a general question about yourself and your work. I will then move into asking you a series of questions regarding white saviorism and your experiences. To complete the interview, I will ask a series of more general questions about your work and educational background. Please note that you are welcome to ask clarifying questions at any time and you may refuse to answer any question.

Do you have any questions about the process before we get started?

Interview Questions
1. Tell me more about yourself and the work you do in relation to white saviorism and racial justice?
2. How long have you been doing work connected to white saviorism?
3. How does white saviorism fit into your broader interests?
4. How do you define white saviorism?
    a. Has your definition changed over time?
5. How did you come to this understanding?
    a. Can you recall a particular moment where you started to begin to understand white saviorism?
6. Was there a particular person or people that helped you come to this understanding?
    a. Can you tell me more about them and how they helped you?
7. How has this understanding influenced your life?
    a. Can you recall any specific examples of how this understanding has impacted your actions?
8. Before I move on from this line of questioning to more general questions about your work and educational experiences, is there anything else you would like for me to know about your experiences with or around white saviorism?
9. Could you tell me more about your educational background?
    a. Did your educational studies guide your understanding of white saviorism?
10. What roles have you held that engage some way with white saviorism and what current position(s) do you hold?

11. Is your work local, national, or international in scope?
12. Is there anything else you want me to know about white saviorism, the role researchers/ educators of white saviorism play, or any other questions you think would be valuable to this research?

Thank you again for taking the time to interview with me. Within the next few weeks, I will send you a copy of the transcript and I will provide you with an opportunity to review the interview notes to check for accuracy. If you have questions at any time, please do not hesitate to reach out to me via email or phone call. (Note: contact info provided in an email.)

Appendix C

Dear { insert contact here },

My name is Jamie Willer and I am currently pursuing my Master of Education in Community Engagement at Merrimack College in North Andover, MA. I am writing to see if you are interested in participating in my graduate research study on how white individuals develop critical consciousness of white saviorism. My master's research capstone is titled, "Working Through the Smog: How White Individuals Develop Critical Consciousness of White Saviorism".

You have been identified as a potential participant because you have written or spoken publicly in some capacity on white saviorism, specifically in your {insert source information}.

Participation in this study entails a one hour interview that can be conducted via either phone call or video chat through the Zoom Software system, depending on the participant's preference. Additionally, after the interview has been completed, participants will be provided an opportunity to review the interview transcript to check for accuracy.

If you are interested in participating in this study and you identify as a white individual who is aware of white saviorism (e.g. white savior narratives, white savior mentalities, the white savior complex), please provide me with a list of days and times between ____ and ____ that would work for you to complete a one hour interview.

If you indicate you are interested in participating in this study, I will send you an electronic informed consent form prior to our interview which will need to be completed and returned to me before we proceed with the interview.

Thank you in advance for considering my request. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions about the study.

Respectfully,

Jamie Willer, M.Ed candidate
Merrimack College