

# Helping Whites Develop Anti-Racist Identities: Overcoming Their Resistance to Fighting Racism

Elizabeth Denevi & Nicholas Pastan

## A Teacher's Perspective

### *Current Manifestations of Resistance: Same Old Privilege, Different Form*

In our current work to confront privilege and dismantle racism, White students and teachers who are exposed to information about how oppression works seem to recognize that there is a problem and want to do something to ameliorate the situation. They show up for meetings of diversity clubs, attend conferences and workshops, and will speak to others about their growing understanding of how privilege/racism works.

Yet, for all of this commitment, the system is not really changing. It feels as if we continue to tinker around the edges of the problem, but we still haven't reached the core. These students have intellectualized the problem, but failed to really *connect* with racism as something that impacts them: the work is still about other people. This attitude is manifested in comments such as: "I really want to do something, but I have no idea what to do," or, "What can I really do as an individual? Changing my behavior won't affect the whole, so why should I do anything?"

Some of these comments are simply more manifestations of White privilege, a means of insulation that allows a White person to express awareness, but that also keeps the White person from really having to do anything with that awareness. This is similar to what we often hear from White people who first start the work of unlearning racism: "I feel so bad. This is so ter-

rible. I feel so bad for people of color." This expression of guilt becomes a substitute for real action: "As long as I say I feel bad, that's enough."

Similarly, many White students are "on board" as long as they don't really have to change their lives in any substantial way.

Those of us who consider ourselves "long term" players in the work feel frustrated by this behavior. It is difficult to respond to because these resisters are present; they show up and say they want to do the work. Their critique that there is no roadmap for them now that they are on-board paralyzes those who have been doing the work because it feels like we are deficient.

We have failed to lay it out clearly, and so no wonder these White folks don't stay committed. If only we, as the self-appointed leaders, had done a better job of explaining what folks could do, then they wouldn't fade away. Yet again, a system of oppression has carefully disguised itself. What we need to get smart about is how systems of oppression reinvent and preserve themselves.

### *The Work of Lillian Roybal Rose*

*If you can't see the pain in the eyes of  
White children,  
you will always condescend to Brown  
children. (1996, p. 40)*

Rose notes that the change comes for Whites once they understand oppression both cognitively and emotionally. She encourages her workshop participants to locate their own experiences of injustice or mistreatment, recalling childhood memories and familial relationships. Whites have "to locate their own sites of oppression, to see that both target and non-target are dehumanized by oppression, to under-

stand that oppression is universal, and to see that, on the receiving end, pain is not black or white or brown, or any other color. It's pain" (p. 41). This emotional connection helps them to understand what they have lost due to racism: "The state of being an ally becomes a matter of reclaiming one's own humanity" (p. 42).

Another key point for Whites is the importance of pride, not as a form of supremacy, but as something that says, "To the extent that I can love and appreciate my group's difference, I can love and appreciate yours" (p. 43).

Instead of feeling this sense of collective pride, Whites often identify with a "collective sense of shame" (p. 43). While Whites are good at identifying themselves as individuals, they struggle to see themselves as members of a group, and this point is key to understanding the persistence of racism: "Those who seek to understand another group's collective experience, but cannot make the shift into an understanding of collective pride in their own group, operate from an irresolute position in any cross-cultural exchange" (p. 43).

To help instill a sense of collective identity, Rose asks participants to remember their ancestors—their hard work, experience, wisdom, and survival. This effort to create a sense of group pride can bring on intense feelings of discomfort and loss:

It appears that for Whites there is loss of collective pride—not as a posture, but in its purer sense, as a connecting form of love. For Whites who are oblivious to their own essence, the appreciation of others will be postured and lacking substance... Collective pride is not an end in itself; it is a means to an end—authentic human connections and intimacy across differences. (p. 44)

This pride can help Whites who often see the pride of people of color as a threat:

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If you don't know pride, in your gut, then our pride will always threaten you. If will always feel as though people of color are something because you are nothing, that we are colorful because you are bland, and that anything we gain is at your expense. (p. 45)

I see this manifested when students or teachers of color want to have their own affinity groups. White educators often question the need for such groups without really exploring why it might be great for those who share a common experience to be able to support one another. Underneath the challenge lies a sense of failure and ineptitude masked by defensiveness and a sense that the Whites know what is best.

Yet, White educators tend to embrace gender affinity groups, and following Rose's analysis, this makes sense because there seems to be a greater establishment of pride around gender identity as opposed to racial identity. Men have been embraced for their willingness to come together to fight sexism, but we have yet to really embrace Whites who come together to support one another in the struggle against racism.

#### *Developing a Group Identity: Becoming a Community of White Anti-Racists*

While completing my Ph.D. research on adolescent racial identity development, I began a process of looking at my own White racial identity and the relationship between teaching and identity construction. Years of reading and studying gave way to dialogue sessions with other Whites and people of color committed to addressing White privilege. Most recently, my focus has been on what I call "White-on-White" dialogue, White racial affinity groups meeting to talk about what it means to be White in schools, how privilege manifests itself, and what we can do to combat racism.

While attending a session Tim Wise offered at the National White Privilege Conference, he offered a simple yet critical model for dialogue. After a brief preface, he said, "I want the White people to talk about the effects of White privilege on White people, and I want the people of color to talk about whatever they want." The room was packed, and as White participants began to speak, it was as if the entire room was standing in solidarity with these first speakers, eager to expose the hidden wound of racism, Wendell Berry's (1989) term for the cost of racism to White people.

The speakers were eloquent and to the point, and as Wise scribed our list of the costs, I was struck by the focus and

commitment of the participants. At this moment, I felt the systemic nature of racism, its institutional force that could only be combated in a systematic way. In recognition of this fact, here was a group of Whites and people of color who were moving beyond individual notions of race and individual acts of racism because we recognized that the problem was bigger than all of us.

What was needed was an institutional response, and the group was up to the task. There was no defensiveness, no outpourings of guilt that, for me, only serve as evidence of privilege (only White people could have the privilege of feeling bad about racism). White people offered explicit examples of how White privilege had negatively impacted their lives while people of color responded with critical insights and asked more questions.

As the list of costs grew, our discussion became more nuanced and complicated. I have never heard White people speak so openly about race in a mixed group. It was refreshing and inspiring because although I had certainly thought about the costs of White privilege and created my own list, I had never had that kind of specific conversation with a group of White people. I had struggled with friends and colleagues to address what Wise calls "the holy grail" of White privilege work, but I had never taken on the topic with a large group.

So often, I work with White folks who have never even thought about their racial privilege. For them, Peggy McIntosh's work is revolutionary (White privilege? Who knew!). So the idea of talking about the costs of racism with Whites at this stage of their development seemed like too big a jump. But I realized that this was the jump we had to make for those who have trouble recognizing privilege and put up walls to keep out any feelings of accountability.

White folks often say to me, "Now I feel really bad. This is too hard. I can't deal." And they leave the work to promote equity because they can't get their arms around the pain. They are so busy trying *not* to feel bad that they side step the entire issue. Wise offered a way of just looking at it head-on, not as a way of personal condemnation or self-flagellation, but rather as recognition of the way social oppression works. Racism/White privilege is a no-win situation for everyone; we just don't talk about it in those terms.

Fortunately for me, I had the perfect opportunity to extend Wise's questions to a group of White educators I was working with who had just read Julie Landsman's *A*

*White Teacher Talks about Race*. Fifty K-12 teachers and administrators had committed to two afternoon dialogue sessions on White identity, privilege, and antiracism. For homework after the first session, I posed a journal question to the group that Wise had given to us at the conference: if you knew this work to end racism would never benefit anyone but you, would you still do it? If so, why? For me, this line of inquiry was a perfect conduit to the costs of White privilege to White people. Participants in the White-on-White group had a range of responses, and many commented on the fact that they had never thought about anti-racist work in these terms before.

Until racism/White privilege is a felt experience, meaning that Whites connect in their bodies with the pain and feel the sting of discrimination as a cost of racism *to them*, there is no real way to successfully bring Whites on board to fight racism. They will just continue to say the right things, still struggling to avoid their own hidden, deeply buried wound. Along with this felt exploration of the cost of racism, there has to be a parallel development of what Rose calls a collective pride in White antiracist identity. Echoing her point about the need for self-identification before one can identify with others, Whites need to establish principled groups that explore, challenge, and, ultimately, affirm White identity. Once we have been able to locate ourselves in the struggle, then we can come together with people of color to end racism.

#### A Student's Perspective

##### *What is White?*

It is probably not surprising to anybody that as a White student entering the world of high school, the first club I joined had nothing to do with diversity or social justice. As progressive as Georgetown Day School (GDS) is, the school wasn't facilitating discussions about White racial identity development or White privilege; indeed, they weren't even trying to relate to White students that they have a large role to play in diversity work. Actually, I had to participate in a club called Diversity Connections for two years before I heard the words White privilege.

For many years, I was one of four White students in Diversity Connections because the view, according to other White students, was that "we don't belong in diversity work." This has begun to change in the last year; however, to many this still remains true. I typically hear the excuse that the diversity groups aren't effectively

inviting *all* people to be involved or that people don't have enough time twice a month to attend meetings or participate in dialogues; yet, I have come to believe that this isn't really the case.

Instead, White students who feel that the diversity programs are exclusive or too time consuming are simply ignorant to the fact that racism affects them, albeit in different ways, just as it affects people of color. A common misconception of White students is that diversity clubs are simply a forum for students of color to sit and complain about the wrongs that have recently been committed against them. This is utterly untrue.

As my junior year began, I was exposed to Peggy McIntosh's (1988) work, and like many I was shaken. I was as shaken about the notion of White privilege as I was about the fact that I had been involved in diversity work for two years and I hadn't ever discussed this. I felt as though I had been wasting my time by ignoring such an important issue. From this point, I was aided in my racial identity development by my literature teacher and diversity director (and my co-author for this article) Dr. Elizabeth Denevi.

I spent my entire Junior year reading Beverly Daniel Tatum, Paul Kivel, Tim Wise, Donna Jackson Nakazawa, and others to help me understand racial identity development and the social construction of privilege. As the first semester of junior year came to a close, I attended the National Association of Independent Schools' Student Diversity Leadership Conference, and I experienced a large White affinity group. I was shocked that almost every student present was oblivious to the idea of White privilege and White identity development.

I had only been involved in discussions around these topics for slightly over two months, and already I felt as though I was in a different universe from these students. Upon my return from the conference, Elizabeth and I decided that we needed to make White identity development and the topics of White privilege and the cost of racism to Whites a point of discussion. After all, we were working in a mostly White school community. We did this by creating a White affinity group modeled after Tim Wise's group called AWARE (Association for White Anti-Racist Education) for White students interested in becoming actively anti-racist.

### *The Backlash: Addressing Resistance*

Needless to say, this group wasn't

received without a few snide comments. GDS is by no means a normal high school. GDS is very small, very progressive, and very proud for having been the first racially integrated school in Washington D.C. However, like any other high school, it is hard to do work around the topic of race and appease everyone. While the administration and principal were very supportive in our attempts to get White students involved in pro-actively anti-racist work, not all of the students were so enthusiastic. Many White students, afraid of the types of discussions we would be having, asked me why I was starting a White supremacy group or why I was trying to have dialogues about being a White ally to people of color and other White people exploring their racial identities. In the midst of a dialogue about privilege and empowering others who aren't always in a position to take a powerful role, a student remarked that he already had all of his required hours of community service.

Although these types of comments can be demoralizing, they are only comments made out of insecurities about the issues we are discussing. These types of comments are not nearly as difficult to deal with as the comments that we are experiencing from students who have shown a short-term level of dedication to understanding how privilege/racism works. Comments such as, "I am sick of having the same discussion. I want to do something, but I don't know what to do. What tangible things I can do in my day-to-day life to affect change? I can't go into a store and ask a clerk to follow me around instead of a person of color," and "Well, I can't just say I'm going to give up my privilege and have it disappear," are infinitely more frustrating because they show relatively little growth as a result of any of our discussions.

These excuses are manifestations of White privilege coming straight from the mouths of those who think that they are committed to dismantling the social construct of privilege. Again, these students solely see the work they are doing as work for *other* people and only want to be involved in the work as long as they can see that *other* people are benefiting from their efforts. They have turned work about themselves into something disturbingly paternalistic. The labors are being made for all the wrong reasons and because of this, we are unable to progress.

It is easy to secure the dedication of the type of student who participates up to a point; however, at times it seems im-

possible to get White students to take an introspective look at themselves. Until we can view the work of developing our own anti-racist racial identities and the work we do to help other Whites develop their own anti-racist racial identities as a success, we will continue to fall into a cycle of privilege and oppression that continues to plague the history of White Americans.

### *The Role of White Affinity Groups: Combating Roadblocks*

So, what exactly is AWARE and how does it help us deal with these remarks? AWARE is both a student and staff White affinity group that is dedicated to developing positive anti-racist racial identities. The group also explores such questions as, what is White privilege in America and what is the cost of racism to Whites in America? This experience is designed to help more White students challenge the social construction of privilege and become proactively anti-racist members of society.

We do this through reading, journal writings, and dinners that provide the time for extended dialogues. The other important aspect of the group is that while AWARE is focused on White privilege and White identity development, AWARE doesn't solely work with White students. We engage in cross-cultural dialogues with other affinity groups, such as the Young Men of Color and the Young Woman of Color.

Now that we have a forum to engage students in emotionally intricate dialogue, how do we combat the "roadblocks" discussed above? Although hearing the very people who are "committed" to doing anti-racist work say, "What can I do?" is infinitely frustrating, it is important not to let other people's setbacks impede one's own progress. These hindrances need to be dealt with in two ways.

First, it is necessary to be an ally to people who are feeling lost and show them that they have simply scratched the surface of a truly complex subject. The process will at times seem arduous; however, no matter how much one thinks one knows, there is always more to learn, and there are always ways to participate in activities that will keep allies from feeling as though there is "nothing to do."

In order to facilitate this in a school setting, students who are lacking the ability to push forward on their own can be given a leadership position or responsibility for the group. Make them facilitate a discussion or pick the next group reading. This forces them to take a critical look at

the material and concepts laid before them so that they will be compelled toward self-reflection.

Second, while individual work is key, another concept that AWARE has begun to develop is the idea of building a positive anti-racist group identity. What does this mean exactly? This simply means that we aren't just focusing on defining our own anti-racist racial identities, but we are also focused on presenting the group as an entity committed to fighting racism. This not only allows us to look to the group for support on an individual level, but it also allows us to avoid having to deal with "roadblocks" in the form of unnecessary and untrue comments speculating that White people talking to each other about being White is a racist action.

A large component to being able to accomplish this is gaining support from both students and faculty of color. If one can garner this support, and it shouldn't be too difficult because most people of color are thrilled to see White people committed to anti-racist work, it mitigates the barriers. In addition, White students who want to get involved in anti-racist work,

yet are unsure of themselves, will become strikingly more comfortable if they see that there is widespread support. One way our AWARE group is creating a larger identity is by sponsoring our own White privilege conference for area students.

Finally, once a moderate-sized group is developed, it is important to meet regularly if for no other reason then to make sure that everybody is still committed. The school year can get hectic, and people can fade in and out of activities. However, it is imperative that students are not allowed to ever feel too comfortable in a passive role. Because White people don't always see the need to do this work on a daily basis (another manifestation of White privilege), it is important to keep students leaning into discomfort and challenging their own thoughts and actions.

Ultimately, putting together a group of White students to explore their racial identity development and anti-racism is an arduous task. There are so many missed opportunities and places to stall that often it can seem like a waste of time. This is by no means a simple task; it takes time, dedication, and patience, but this shouldn't be

surprising. After all, dismantling a system of racism/White privilege isn't exactly an easy endeavor.

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