



Research Articles

Power of Stories to Transform and their Role in White¹ Racial Identity Development

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THE NEED FOR ROLE MODELS

For the past twenty years, I have taught courses in racism and social justice at a small liberal arts university. In those courses, I attempted to help my students understand how the dynamics of racism so evident in U.S. history are still at work today in more systematized forms. Despite the recent resurgence of White Nationalist groups, most Whites are less likely to participate in “active racism,” than in previous eras. Yet, they still engage in “passive racism,” which is often seen in Whites’ conscious and unconscious failure to confront or call attention to discriminatory acts or policies as a way of avoiding controversy or dissension with other Whites. As Beverly Tatum (1997, p. 11) says, “[be]cause racism is ingrained in the fabric of American institutions, it is easily self-perpetuating.”² While generally unaware of the degree to which their status in society has been granted to them based on their race, I have found when the evidence is presented to them, many White students are open to exploring the current realities of racism. While not all White students respond positively when presented with the concepts of White privilege, White power, and the insidious presence of systemic racism, many do.

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However, acknowledging the reality of racism, and knowing what to do with that awareness are two different things. In her teaching of White college students on issues of racism Tatum found that many of them were bound up with a sense of guilt and hopelessness as to what they should do. Likewise, I have found in my courses that there often comes a point where White students feel caught between an overwhelming sense of guilt and shame for the history of White racism from which they have benefitted,

¹ Throughout this article, I have chosen to capitalize White, Black and People of Color, unless quoting authors who have put these words the lower case.

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while feeling powerless as to how to proceed in a way that does not perpetuate existing racist policies and laws or cause offense to Persons of Color they know through casual interaction. For many of my White students this is a point at which they feel stuck between the awareness of their need to change and confusion on what or how to change. Tatum refers to this as the “guilty white” model of racial identity, which is “characterized by the heightened awareness of racism and the accompanying shame and embarrassment about being white” and which “interferes with one’s ability to take effective action to interrupt the expressions of racism” (Tatum, 1994, p. 471).

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In a graduate course, I have taught for several years on Race and Ethnic Relations, there always comes a point where I divide the class into racial caucuses according to their racial/ethnic self-identification. One time I divided the students into three groups – people of African descent, Latinx/Hispanics, and Whites. My instruction to each group was to talk among themselves and to come back in 30 minutes to report on what they celebrated about their racial/ethnic group identity and culture. While the Black and Latinx/Hispanic groups could share several cultural treasures, the White group reported that they had nothing to share. In fact, they confessed that for about half of the allotted time, they sat silently looking at each other trying to figure out how to start the conversation. When confronted with the reality of their Whiteness, these students were at a loss to see anything positive.

Tatum (1997) writes that in addition to opposing racism the “task for Whites is to develop a positive White identity based on reality, not on assumed superiority” (p. 94). However, whenever anti-racism efforts are discussed in formal or informal settings, most often the legacies of courageous men and women of color are invoked. Anti-racist heroes such as Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Septima Clark, Cesar Chavez, Dolores Huerta, Malcolm X, Fannie Lou Hamer and others are celebrated, as they should be. These men and woman stood up to racist laws and practices despite facing the threat of imprisonment, torture and even death; for their courage and stamina they are rightly celebrated.

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However, there is also a history of Whites who resisted the temptations of White power and privilege, and chose to align themselves with People of Color seeking to bring about racial justice. These White people were moved by the passion and justice of the anti-racist cause and transgressed the mores of their White communities to support the efforts toward dismantling racism that was being led by their brothers and sisters of color. Often their actions were the result of a long process of growing awareness that eventuated in their acting against the formal and informal rules of their racist environment. Many of these folks suffered for their choices and some even died. These relatively unknown White people provide an alternative model of Whiteness: The White ally.

In the instance mentioned above, as the White students and I explored the reasons behind their “stuck-ness” and overwhelming guilt, one of the things that became evident to me (and affirmed by the White students) was the fact they did not know what an anti-racist White person looked like. So I shared with them a few examples of Whites who opposed racism in their times. I told the story of John Woolman, the 18th century Quaker who convinced the Philadelphia Friends Yearly Meeting to abolish slavery in their fellowship. I talked about Myles Horton, who started the Highlander Folk School Center in east Tennessee, a place that

became one of the few places Blacks and Whites could gather and learn together during the Civil Rights era. And I mentioned Elijah Lovejoy, a printer in Alton, IL who published an abolitionist newspaper, and was killed when his printing press was set on fire by an angry racist White mob. Out of that conversation, at the urging of some of my students, I wrote *White Allies in the Struggle for Racial Justice*, (Boyd, 2015),

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which relates 17 stories of 18 Whites through U.S. history who sought to be anti-racist allies in their time.

WHITES CONFRONTING THE REALITY OF THEIR RACISM

Part of my inspiration for writing those stories came from Beverly Tatum. Tatum (1994) has found that White students experiencing the inner struggle regarding racism have found it helpful to be given role models of White anti-racist allies, both living and in the past. White anti-racist activist Tim Wise (2011) has also pointed out that White people do not know have not role models for how to live and act against the racism of our day. In learning such stories White students gain a renewed sense of hope in the face of the depression they feel about their inability to change. She quotes one of her students who wrote: “Now that we have learned about the severity of the all the horrible oppression in the world, it is comforting to know how I can become an ally.” Another student wrote: “I don’t need to feel helpless when there is so much I can do.” Summing up, Tatum writes, “... the restoration of hope is an essential part of the learning process. Otherwise students both white and of color, become immobilized by their own despair” (pp. 472, 473).

To understand the role that the stories of White anti-racist allies can play in the transformation toward a non-racist identity and approach to life, it is helpful to understand the role race plays in the social and cultural identity of White people. People of Color are confronted with the reality of racism everyday as they deal with subtle microaggressions and overt expressions of discrimination on a regular basis. In contrast, White people can, and often do, go through life oblivious to the role their Whiteness influences the way they are treated, the opportunities they are afforded, and the choices they are offered. I am referring not simply to one’s skin color or racial category, but rather Whiteness as a social identity that comes with privileges and historical benefits resulting from history and from current economic, cultural, and political systems. Like other racial categories, Whiteness is a social construct that comes with certain expectations and limitations dictated by culture and social policy. Summing up the literature on Whiteness Hardiman and Keehn (2012, p. 122) write: “Whiteness is seen as a position, an identity, a discourse, and more, but a common goal in most writing is the intention of understanding Whiteness in order to dismantle White privilege and racial dominance. “

Guinier and Torres (2002) describe the different experiences of race and its impact on Whites and People of Color by using water as a metaphor for race. While the basic elements that make up water do not change with temperature, the way water appears varies significantly whether it is in the form of ice, liquid or vapor. They describe the difference this way:

Minus the heat source of privilege, race for many poor black people is like water in a frozen state. The crystalline structure of race locks many poor black people into a set of local relationships that have to be negotiated regardless of their social position as defined by other factors.... By contrast, for most White people, including many who are poor, race is experienced more like a vapor than like ice. Water in its gaseous state is not constrained.

It is functionally formless. It does not inhibit movement.... Their experience permits them to assume an essentially evanescent quality for race (p. 90).

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When Whites are confronted with the ways in which Whiteness has privileged them at the expense of People of Color, they experience what Robin DiAngelo calls “White fragility.” DiAngelo (2016) writes: White fragility is a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves.” However, she further points out that White fragility is a “sociology of dominance” whose purpose is “to protect, maintain and reproduce White supremacy” (p. 247).

Because Whites have been socialized in this sociology of dominance, they are uninformed and ill-equipped to deal with the ways Whiteness, continues to guide and direct their lives. They are in uncharted emotional and intellectual territory, and most, if not all, the other White people in their lives are equally ill-equipped. In my own study of racism awareness, I found that when people begin to become aware of the way race and racism has shaped their lives, they experience a high level of emotional discomfort that causes them to want to retreat to a pre-awareness state of uncritical acceptance of the status quo (Boyd, 2003). Moreover, much of White culture supports and reinforces this retreat (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). Therefore, to grow in one’s understanding of the role race places in one’s life, a person must make a conscious choice to continue to grapple with the information and emotions that come with becoming more aware of one’s Whiteness.

In essence the goal of storytelling is to help Whites to develop what Thompson and Neville (1999) call a “healthy White personality” or a “New White” way of thinking. They note that numerous authors have highlighted the fact that Whites generally take their privileged and powerful social status for granted, even claiming ignorance of that status. As such, their sense of self is based on a false sense of history and position. While acknowledging the positive contributions of their European ancestors to the development of U.S. society, White people today must also acknowledge the oppressive attitudes and actions that were part of that history. Additionally, Whites need to grasp how their accomplishments as a people are dependent on the contributions and suffering of People of Color. In so doing Whites must relinquish the myth of individualism that permeates the White perspective and adopt a more interdependent perspective on their achievements vis-à-vis other racial groups. This transition cannot happen without significant interpersonal and intrapersonal struggle with one’s ancestry, one’s social upbringing, and one’s racial peers.

THE JOURNEY TOWARD A WHITE ANTI-RACIST IDENTITY

Two researchers who have attempted to describe the process by which Whites develop an anti-racist identity are Janet Helms (1990) and Rita Hardiman (1982; 2012). Helms sought to describe a model identity development of Black students toward a healthy sense of self in young adulthood. Helms also looked at parallel but different path of anti-racist identity development in White students. Hardiman’s model published around the same time focused exclusively on anti-racist identity development in Whites. The Helms model describes the process in six stages while Hardiman identifies five stages. While both models describe a similar process, Helms’ seems to have a more nuanced view of the changes

and struggles Whites must go through to develop a non-racist identity. A comparison of the two models can be found in Figure 1 below.³

Figure 1

Comparison of Helms (1990) and Hardiman (1982/2012) Theories of White Racial Identity Development		
Stage	Helms (1990)	Hardiman (1982/2012)
0		Lack of Social Consciousness
1	Contact	Acceptance
2	Disintegration	Resistance
3	Reintegration	
4	Pseudo-Independent	
5	Immersion/Emersion	Redefinition
6	Autonomy	Internalization

Both models were first proposed in the 1980's and are overly simplistic in describing the movement of Whites toward an anti-racist identity (Rowe, Bennet & Atkinson, 1994) and have been somewhat controversial. For instance, Roediger (1999) has questioned whether there can in fact be a "healthy White personality" and that instead identification with Whiteness should be discouraged so as not do legitimate Whiteness in any way. Despite these shortcomings, these models point to the prospect that with great effort and assistance Whites can move away from distancing themselves and denying their role and responsibility for propagating racism both personally and structurally, and can begin to move toward a position of solidarity with persons of color. In his study of White racial justice advocates, Warren (2010) found that almost always they began with a "seminal experience" that was characterized as "profound shock... accompanied by powerful emotions" (p. 27) that caused deep internal conflict where the individual felt a huge gap between their espoused values and actual lived behavior. From that shocking awakening individuals began a process that eventually led them to changed perspectives and a lived commitment to anti-racist activism.

While Whites can move toward the stage of what Helms calls *Autonomy*, Tatum points out: "While autonomy might be described as racial self-actualization, racial identity development [for Whites] never really ends. The person at this level is continually open to new information and a new way of thinking about racial and cultural variables" (Tatum, 1997, p. 112). In their study of White privilege Middleton and her associates (2009) used the image of a journey to describe the process by which people of privilege move from awareness to action. The journey toward an anti-racist identity is lifelong for White people. My contention and experience suggests that stories of White anti-racist allies is one guide and aid for that journey.

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THE ROLE OF STORIES IN PROMOTING AN ANTI-RACIST WHITE IDENTITY

"To be human is to tell stories"

³ I will be providing a cursory overview of these two models, but these are the most prominent several models of racial identity development that have been forth theorists.

Clark (2010) begins her discussion of the use of stories in adult education with the sentence above. Stories are the ways in which human beings make sense out of the disordered confusion of their lives and derive meaning from their experiences. In effect identity is shaped and determined by the stories one constructs and tells oneself. As Smith (2007, p. 32) writes, “Narrative understanding is our most primitive form of explanation. We make sense of things by fitting them into stories.” Rossiter (2002,) contends that stories are effective educational tools because they are believable, able to be remembered, and “provide an entryway into personal growth and change” (p. 3). Hammack (2008) adds that one’s identity is always shaped in the interplay between the self and society, and that in effect one seeks to define oneself in response to and in the context of the master narrative the dominant culture is telling. Therefore, one’s story must always be viewed within the larger and social context in which it is being lived.

Through the centuries human beings have used stories to define personhood, moral values, the meaning of suffering, and much more. Such stories have been vital to the promulgation of certain religious and spiritual truths, as well as the preservation of indigenous or minority cultures often suppressed and oppressed by dominant cultures (Smith, 2007). Zipes (2009, p. 140) points out that in recent times governments and corporations have used storytelling to “confuse and control the minds of people” as to what the reality and truth are. He references the widespread use of stories in modern communication technologies that are used to exploit and manipulate the needs of people for the purposes of profit or political gain. He contends that “there is alarming amount of disdain for humanity and for truth in the stories spread effectively by the state and corporations.” In response Zipes calls for “resistant story telling” which helps people “regain their voices, retain their stories and disseminate them so that they can resist ... the colonization of master narratives throughout the world.”

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With a similar sentiment Neile (2009) identifies storytelling as a means of facilitating social change, and calls upon storytellers to be social activists “who recognize these hegemonic narratives and to undermine them with effective counter stories that reflect the experience and the value system of the marginalized” (p. 70). At the same time, she warns that storytelling is not some sort of “quick fix” for oppression and suppression of alternative perspectives, but must be part of an overall strategy of social and community change. For example, Smith (2007) used storytelling with Xhosa children in South Africa, a significant percentage of who suffered from poverty, abuse, disease and violence-based trauma. Stories were tools that helped the children recapture their rich cultural heritage and restore a sense of dignity. He used stories from the Xhosa culture to remind them that suffering could be overcome, and that they could develop empathy for one another. While many of the stories he told were ancient Xhosa tales and myths, he also used more contemporary narratives, such as the story of South African activist Stephen Biko, to remind them of their legacy of resistance to oppression. In telling these more contemporary tales Smith stresses that “the past does not resolve itself and that it depends on the vision and drive of real heroes who step up to solve the problems.”

While Whites seeking to develop a non-racist identity and work for social justice do not suffer oppression in the way that People of Color or colonized peoples have through the centuries, there is a sense in which the stories that inform their values and visions for the world without racism have been silenced. In the post-Civil Rights era, there is a strong tendency in dominant White society to think that racism is a thing of the past and that Whites should seek to be “colorblind” as it relates to People of Color. So, while Whites tend to notice racism in its most overt forms, they often ignore the institutional and systemic dimensions of racism that operate without notice or question. The problem in that approach lies in the fact that such an approach keeps White people from acknowledging their privilege and the benefits that have accrued to

them as a race because of the history of White racism in their history. Thus, Whites tend to deny and suppress racist thoughts and behaviors without really facing them and undergoing authentic personal change. In his study of White students and middle-class workers in the Detroit, Bonilla-Silva (2006) found that racist attitudes and behaviors were often cloaked in a commitment to colorblindness, and whereas overt racism was rarely expressed, racist perspectives and attitudes were often embedded in “code words” that conveyed the same attitudes in a less overt manner. ⁴

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Similarly, in education while tribute has been paid to the gains of contributions to society made by People of Color through specialized events such as Black History Month, Hispanic History Month, and Martin Luther King Day, the central role of racism in U.S. history has largely been sanitized. As Hughes (2007) writes, “students perceive racism as a tragedy of the past divorced from the historical issues such as labor politics and gender and the contemporary realities of power in American society (p. 203). The stories of systemic, institutional and personal White racism are not told, nor are the stories of those Whites who chose to resist that dominant theme in U.S. history. As a result, stories of White anti-racist allies remain suppressed to keep the sanitized story intact. For to do otherwise is to tell an alternative history, a history of which the fuller truth would need to be told.

The stories of systemic, institutional and personal White racism are not told, nor are the stories of those Whites who chose to resist that dominant theme in U.S. history.

In *White Allies in the Struggle for Racial Justice*, I sought to tell stories of people on this journey, and who by no means completely eradicated the racist ideas, perspectives or actions in their lives. However, they consciously sought to challenge and undo the structures and policies that marginalized and oppressed the People of Color in their midst. They were and are real people with discernible flaws and inadequacies, who despite those limitations sought to work for racial justice alongside of their peers of color. ⁵

These stories present the opportunity for Whites to embrace what Markus and Nurius (1986) refer to as “possible selves,” the picture of one’s hoped-for future self. Possible selves are those representations of oneself to which one hopes to change or aspires based on past and present self-awareness. Building on the insights of James, Freud, Rogers, Levinson and others, Markus and Nurius posit that an individual’s self-concept includes not only how they see themselves in the present, but also in the future. Those future possible selves can be both positive (what one hopes to become) or negative (the future self-one fears). Those future possible selves also can be reflected on, and can motivate one to make plans or incorporate behaviors that will facilitate that change. At the same time, such change is difficult, because most people instinctively fear and resist change, even if the change sought is perceived as positive. Moreover, the possible selves one can imagine derive from one’s sociocultural and historical context, the media and other persons in one’s life, and thus may be limited by one’s context and personal experience.

⁴ For in depth study of White color-blindness, see Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists*

⁵ As an example, one of the stories I told was of Morris Dees, the found of the Southern Poverty Law Center. Dees was recently fired by Southern Poverty Law Center for being part of a culture of abuse and possible racism at the center. Though he accomplished great things, Dees certainly was flawed (Burch, Blinder & Eligon, 2019)

By telling stories of Whites in U.S. history who worked to be allies with People of Color throughout U.S. history, Whites who might have had limited exposure to Persons of Color, and have not been exposed to the reality and destruction of racism, have the opportunity to imagine future selves that break free from the shackles of Whiteness and ignorance. As such one's possible selves become the source of motivation to change one's ideas, values, beliefs, and actions toward a more consistent self-definition.

However, it is important to note that the purpose of telling stories about White anti-racist allies is not simply to enable Whites to feel comfortable with their Whiteness, but rather to move them toward personal and societal transformation. Tatum (1997) points out:

There is a history of White protest, against racism, a history of Whites who have resisted the role of oppressor and who have been allies to People of Color. ... One of the consequences of racism in our society is that those who oppose racism are often marginalized, and as a result their stories are not readily accessed. Yet having these stories makes difference to those Whites who are looking for ways to be agents of change. White people who are doing this work need to make their stories known to serve as guides for others (pp. 108, 109).

The work of White racial identity theorists confirms that at the stage in which Whites are beginning to deconstruct their former White identity and adopting a new White perspective, stories of role models who have gone before them in that struggle can be a guide and inspiration for their continued development. While such stories alone are not sufficient to accomplish this transformation, they can be vital instruments in the transformation process. When accompanied by an honest self-analysis on both a cognitive and emotional level, such stories can point a way for Whites seeking to overcome the powerlessness of their guilt, fear and anger, and progress to embrace their Whiteness not as over against others, but interdependent with Persons of Color.

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