Whites-Only Anti-Racist Groups

Promise & Perils

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Introduction

Schools continue to be steeped in racism, creating a discriminatory and hostile climate for teachers and students of color alike (Kohli, 2018; Quinn, 2017). Efforts to combat racial inequities by increasing teacher and staff understanding of race and racism may help (Bryan, 2017; Joyner & Casey, 2015). In this reflective article, we consider the potential role of whites-only anti-racist groups in such efforts.

Whites-only anti-racist groups have become increasingly common in the United States in recent years, appearing at college campuses and other venues (cf., Athey, 2017; Delgado, 2017). These groups are generally organized by well-intended whites or people of color to advance anti-racism while simultaneously reducing the burden and trauma on people of color. However, these groups are fraught. On the one hand, there are valid reasons for making whites take responsibility

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for teaching themselves and each other about race. On the other hand, the question of whether dialogue among whites can have a beneficial anti-racist impact is an important one to consider.

The purpose of this collaborative reflective article is to explore the promises and problems of whites-only anti-racist groups. Throughout the article, we analyze such groups by applying three lenses to a set of critiques of whites-only anti-racist groups: critical race theory (CRT), journaled experiences of the first two authors who participated in such a group, and reflections on those journaled experiences by the third author.

The first part of the article introduces the concept of the master narrative along with CRT to address the importance of non-white counternarratives in resisting racism. These ideas are essential to a discussion of whites-only groups, since the absence of non-white counternarratives is the main source of controversy surrounding them. In the second part, we ask whether whites-only anti-racist groups have the potential to support counternarratives in schools and other settings, despite the absence of people of color.

Importantly, this article is not a comparison of whites-only and cross-racial anti-racist groups; we start with the assumption that mixed-race groups are superior to whites-only groups in fighting racism. Hence our reflections consider whether whites-only groups can serve as a necessary space in the racial identity developmental work of white people. Given that cross-racial dialogue is generally burdensome and unsafe for people of color, whether and to what extent do whites-only groups have the potential to contribute to the creation of a less racist society.

The Master Narrative and Critical Race Theory

Race has come to represent one of the United States' continuing democratic dilemmas. Racial and ethnic inequalities permeate society. In the current U.S. context, people of color, in particular African Americans, have faced repeated instances of police brutality. In addition to the criminal justice system, white supremacy and racism characterize the sectors of education, law, politics, and others. Subsequent divided conversations about the causes of the violence and inequality and little political movement to address what appears to be a backlash against any mention of the term *white privilege* show the pervasiveness of white supremacy.

Key to the challenge of racism in the U.S. right now is the master narrative, or the story told by white people about race and racism (Sue, 2015). Narratives are stories, tied to oral traditions, translated into written texts and enacted through scripts. As such, they represent collective histories and performative identities, and they serve as a hidden curriculum that shapes the ways people think. Key components of the master narrative are that racism is loathsome but a thing of the past and that we live in a meritocratic, post-racial society in which people should not pay attention to race (Sue, 2015). The master narrative allows white people to reassure themselves that they are moral, unbiased, and innocent as they work to maintain the racist status quo.

CRT challenges the master narrative. For decades, critical race theorists have grappled with the complexity of

race and racism, paying particular attention to the ways that power structures reinscribe racialized oppressions (Bell, 1980; Crenshaw, 1988, pp. 1331–1387; Delgado & Stefancic, 2000). Facing an insidious racial history, CRT scholars have worked to unravel the dominance of whiteness as racial privilege that undermines claims of freedom and universal civil rights.

Recent CRT scholars continue to challenge the notion of meritocracy, asserting that meritocracy privileges whiteness and that this privileging undergirds people's beliefs about what is compelling evidence (Rose, 2017) and ultimately coalesces into an institutionalized and permanent racialized state (Bracey, 2015). Manifestations of this in schools include dropout and expulsion rates of African American youths caused by racialized practices such as tracking, school funding, and teaching practices (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

At its core, CRT grapples with how we face, challenge, and interrogate the world, and one key aspect of this work is an intentional decentering of whiteness and a focus on the narratives of people of color. CRT thus offers a tangible way to deconstruct whiteness and white privilege and challenge the master narrative—through counterstorying, a means by which people of color communicate "the experience and realities of the oppressed" and "catalyze the necessary cognitive conflict to jar dysconscious racism" on the part of white people (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 58).

Counterstories to the Master Narrative

Counterstories serve two main functions. First, they are essential to the very difficult task of helping whites understand the experience of being non-white (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000). Stories can be more persuasive than facts and can reveal more powerfully the fact that there are different realities. Slave narratives, for example, spoke a distinct voice into U.S. history, reinscribing a much-needed counterstory that illuminated the agency of enslaved people (Harrison, 1997). Second, counterstories "serve a powerful psychic function for minority communities" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000, p. 43) as they mitigate the suffering in silence experienced by people of color, which decreases alienation and has healing power (hooks, 1989).

Anti-racist dialogue groups are a venue in which counterstories are important. As more scholars of color

have emerged and CRT has expanded across disciplines, these groups have emerged as critical spaces to examine, nuance, and deconstruct the ways that we talk about race and racism. Ideally, in these groups, people of color can use counterstories to challenge the master narrative, and whites can learn.

Yet talking about race remains difficult, because anti-racist groups, no matter how well intended, operate within existing institutionalized structures that maintain belief systems based on the master narrative and within existing power structures (DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2014; Leonardo & Porter, 2010). Although research has clearly demonstrated that people of color are assumed to be inferior and are observed with suspicion by whites, anti-racist groups often contain white people who believe the present is post-racial and that race and racism should no longer fundamentally shape the way we question and critique the world—in other words, people who believe the master narrative (Rich, 2013).

This difference in perspective and life experience between whites and people of color leads to major problems with cross-race anti-racist dialogue. First, the learning that is supposed to occur for whites is hindered by a lack of trust between whites and people of color. Uslaner (2002) argued that "race is *the* life experience that has the biggest impact on trust" (p. 91), and multiple studies have shown that whites and people of color trust members of their own race more than members of other racial/ethnic groups (Smith, 2010). The lack of trust diminishes the extent to which whites hear and understand voices of people of color and hence the extent to which counterstories have power.

The second problem is that although such groups are supposed to allow people of color to voice their experiences, mixed-race groups are generally unsafe for people of color (Leonardo & Porter, 2010). For whites to learn that their experiences are contested, and to connect their experiences to systemic racism and other systems of power and domination, whites need to be able to share their beliefs and experiences (Quaye, 2014; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2014). That leaves people of color with the responsibility for hearing whites' views about race and teaching whites about race—a burdensome and even traumatic responsibility for people of color, though most whites do not see it as such. Furthermore, research has indicated that whites often use these groups to silence people of color and maintain white supremacy (DiAngelo

& Sensoy, 2014). People of color entering anti-racist groups with white folks thus represents a complicated counterstory, one in which danger and mistrust shadow the dialogic encounter.

We argue in this article that whites-only anti-racist groups are problematic because they inherently decenter the voices of people of color and thus are antithetical to counterstorying. However, we also argue that there may be potential for whites working together to use counterstories previously voiced by people of color to recognize and contest the master narrative in their own and each other's languages, stories, and explanations. Doing so avoids people of color having to bear witness to the painful discourse that inevitably accompanies white attempts to grapple with race but, at the same time, might chip away at the master narrative and decrease its power in small ways.

In this way, anti-racist all-white groups might be a half decent compromise: They cause some problems but resolve others. Their end result is flawed, given the absence of people of color, but with several caveats, such groups may be better than nothing.

Context

The first two authors of this article, Puchner and Markowitz, who are white, participated in a whites-only anti-racist group in the midwestern United States in 2017. The third author, Roseboro, who is black, did not. The anti-racist group was run by a nonprofit based in a nearby city, and the effort to bring the group to the university town was spearheaded by an African American faculty member at the university where Puchner and Markowitz work.

The whites-only anti-racist group was a book discussion group that met every other week for two hours, from January to May 2017, for a total of 10 meetings. The work of the group was based on the book *Witnessing Whiteness* by Shelly Tochluk (2007). Prior to each meeting, participants read a chapter of the book and then did small- and large-group discussion-based activities related to the book. Facilitators were two men and one woman, volunteers trained by the nonprofit, and the participants were 24 women (no men signed up).

Puchner, whose field is teacher education, and Markowitz, whose field is sociology, have long-standing interests in social justice. Puchner joined the group to learn more about her own racism and to learn how to talk to other whites more

effectively about racism. Markowitz was wary about how effective an all-white group could be in battling racism, but she respected the black colleague who had organized the group, and she was curious about out how such a group would work. Puchner journaled after each group meeting, and Markowitz journaled responses to Puchner's journal entries at the end of the program.

Roseboro, whose field is curriculum and cultural studies, read Puchner's and Markowitz's journal entries and engaged in dialogue with Puchner after the whites-only anti-racist group discussions had ended. She is an African American woman faculty member at a different institution who has, in prior years, worked at the same institution as the first and second authors. Much of her research has examined the narratives of black women educators, the struggle for equity in public education, and the public pedagogies that emanate from both. She continues to examine the ways in which self-defined anti-racist white people engage in conversations about race in public, community-based forums. She entered this research project skeptical and hopeful, doubtful that all-white groups could confront their own racism and hopeful that, perhaps, such groups would do some preliminary work on their own and save people of color from the onerous task of constantly teaching white people about race.

In April, about two-thirds of the way through the whites-only anti-racist program, Puchner and Markowitz read an article by Didi Delgago (2017) critiquing white anti-racist groups that had appeared in the online newspaper *Huffington Post*. They found the points raised in the article to be thought provoking, and the present reflective essay is inspired by Delgado's helpful critique. Our article explores the critiques, using CRT as a frame. Although Delgado's article did not appear in a scholarly journal, each of her critiques has a firm basis in the scholarly literature, as will be seen in the discussion of the critiques. Especially since we found no analysis of whites-only anti-racist groups per se in the academic literature, Delgado's straightforward critiques directed specifically at such groups create a useful organizing framework for this article.

Journals of the first two authors and the third author's responses to the journals inform this reflective work.[1] Although Delgado's (2017) article critiques all organizations in the category of "predominantly white-led anti-racism groups," this article is only about explicitly whites-only discussion or dialogue groups.

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In reflecting on whether these groups can be helpful, we address each of the following issues raised by Delgado (2017). We ultimately consider whether whites-only anti-racist groups have a place in fighting racism. The critiques raised by Delgado on which we focus are as follows:

1. The world does not need additional spaces where people of color would be uncomfortable and in which whites are given a voice to express racist views.

2. A group of white people cannot be trusted to bring about anti-racist outcomes.

3. Whites-only anti-racist groups may mainly function as a way for whites to assuage their guilt.

4. Anti-racism groups need accountability to people of color, and many whites-only groups do not have this accountability.

5. These groups need resources to function; thus whites are using racism to gain resources.

Critique 1: White-Dominant Spaces

Delgado (2017) writes, "If there's one thing white people DON'T need, it's more spaces reserved for their comfort at the expense and exclusion of people of color" (para. 24). Indeed, finding more ways to exclude people of color is problematic, as racism "creates white ownership . . . of physical space" (Cabrero, Watson, & Franklin, 2016, p. 119), and thus most spaces in the U.S. are already white spaces. Whites generally do not see this, because racism operates such that even as being white is not noticed and is considered normal, it is oppressive and dominant.

Whites absolutely do not need more white-dominant spaces. Importantly, however, multiracial dialogue, in which people of color and whites are present, is also almost always white-dominant. Such dialogue is virtually never held for the benefit of people of color, nor is it safe for people of color (DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2014; Leonardo & Porter, 2010). Leonardo and Porter argued that in

such contexts, people of color are faced with two choices: either to restrain themselves and thus miss out on an opportunity for self-development or to express themselves and be seen as crazy and angry.

This dynamic is no less true when the goal is to critique racism. One solution to this problem is to abolish the idea of safe spaces for such conversations and to expect and allow for what Leonardo and Porter called *humanizing violence*, which involves people of color being allowed to be angry, to be frustrated, and to say what they think and believe.

However, white fragility makes it difficult for whites to hear people of color convey their expertise about racism and their anger regarding white supremacy (DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2014). Thus such authentic racial dialogue is perceived as violent by whites, meaning that only very few whites will seek it out (DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2014; Leonardo & Porter, 2010).

Because white fragility often leads whites to avoid situations in which people of color voice their anger and experiences, it is difficult for dialogue groups containing whites and people of color to be educational for whites. This problem has led some educators of color, including Roseboro, to argue that to be effective, anti-racist education aimed at whites sometimes needs to involve compromise. That is, one has to give up important racial ground in a specific context to make other kinds of gains that might be important in the long run.

For example, Smith and Lander's (2012) experience in teacher education led them to argue that for whites with low levels of understanding of racism, white educators may be more effective than educators of color. Smith and Lander posited that when the topic is equality, a person of color is assumed to be motivated to teach the topic because the person is a person of color as opposed to being motivated to teach because of the person's intellectual expertise. This belief marginalizes the topic in the eyes of whites, thus decreasing its perceived validity (Smith & Lander, 2012).

Smith and Lander argued further that although a white teacher teaching about race is often assumed to be biased, the bias is not attributed to the teacher's race. In contrast, with the teacher of color, the bias is attributed to a personal agenda. Hence, they argued, when white teachers teach about race to white students, they are colluding in whiteness, but the collusion may help students see

racism and whiteness, at a very novice level, that they would not see with a teacher of color.

Roseboro, a black educator, talks about forms of pedagogical compromise she uses when teaching preservice and in-service teachers about racism. One such compromise, aimed at opening the door to white students' beginning understandings of racism, is to de-center racism and focus on unpacking and interrogating whiteness, because to center racism forces white students to confront an "othered" lived experience that they then automatically equate with personal blame. A second compromise is to purposely de-center her authority and guide the discussion in ways that inspire other white students who express anti-racist discourse to challenge other white students on their racial privilege. Doing so potentially creates space for other white students to hear that anti-racist discourse without automatically rejecting it as they may do if it came from a person of color.

Roseboro does this despite the fact that white students routinely question (implicitly and explicitly) the authority of teachers of color and those instructors have to actively work to establish and maintain authority in ways that white teachers do not. Roseboro also pulls in text excerpts, particularly the narratives of others, such that the voices of those authors indirectly facilitate class discussions.

In relation to whites-only anti-racist groups, the point is that there is no denying that the addition of white spaces is problematic. But whites-only groups can be seen as a form of pedagogical compromise: Arguably, this type of racial compromise might sometimes be pedagogically useful, especially for whites in early stages of thinking about racism. Unfortunately, and somewhat ironically, whites are more likely to trust other whites' depictions of racism experienced by people of color than they are to trust the depictions of people's own experiences of racism.

Critique 2:
Can One Trust a Group
of White People
to Productively Fight Racism?

Delgado (2017) says,

If history has taught me anything, it's that there's nothing more disappointing or dangerous than a room full of white people. With that in mind, I'd like you to consider why anyone would

expect white-led anti-racism organizations to be any different. (para. 4)

Puchner and Markowitz's experience showed that their whites-only anti-racist group both perpetuated and challenged white supremacy; thus we have some ambivalence in answering this question.

Despite the intentions of the group, perpetuation of white supremacy was perhaps inevitable. For example, in Puchner and Markowitz's anti-racist group, a spontaneous discussion of whether whites-only groups are appropriate occurred during a meeting about three-quarters of the way through the program. The topic emerged when Puchner and Markowitz told the group that they were embarrassed to tell people of color that they were participating in a whites-only group.

Questioning the entire premise of the group led to defensiveness on the part of some group members. In response to that defensiveness, Markowitz said that she would not trust a group of men to sit around in a room and talk about feminism. Some members disagreed with Markowitz, but research on men's feminist groups has provided some support for Markowitz's skepticism regarding the results of well-meaning, self-described feminist men discussing feminism with each other.

Bridges (2013) studied the online discourse of two all-men's groups, one feminist and one antifeminist. Not surprisingly, the antifeminist group portrayed men as a stigmatized group. More surprisingly, Bridges found that the feminist men also believed they were stigmatized. Specifically, they felt they were associated with and assumed to be as bad as most men, though they perceived themselves as different from other men.

Puchner and Markowitz also noticed this discourse of "being different" used by some members of their group, and they interpreted it as a way for some whites who believe in structural racism to separate themselves from most whites. Here is an excerpt from Markowitz's journal:

I do remember being a little frustrated with two women in the group who talked a lot about how different their backgrounds were; one had grown up in Europe and she talked about how that differentiated her experiences with race, implying that she had less racist attitudes than everyone else. . . . When this woman (we'll call her Sarah) came to the U.S. in middle school, she was invited the first day by a black

girl to eat lunch with her and she said yes. Then a white girl told Sarah she shouldn't eat with the black girl and Sarah told the group that she couldn't understand why the white girl warned her against eating lunch with the black girl. Sarah claimed she had no idea about how race was constructed in the U.S. The other woman . . . talked a lot about how active she'd been in anti-racist work all her life and how she had no problems interacting with people from all races and how that differentiated her from others.

The identity of the feminist men in Bridges's (2013) study and the whites in our anti-racist group who focused on how different they were from other whites depends partly on being different from and less sexist and racist than other members of the dominant group. In the case of whites, Tochluk (2007) wrote that this focus on seeing themselves as "a different sort of white person" (p. 109) blinds them from seeing their own racism.

As Roseboro read this first journal response from her colleagues, her hopefulness about the possibilities inherent in such groups wavered. To be productive, she believed such groups need to be predicated on some fundamental tenets. First, every white person in the room has to acknowledge her or his own racism and, perhaps more important, resist the urge to create anti-racist hierarchies (Case, 2012).

Any articulation of how you might not be as racist inevitably shifts the focus of the anti-racist conversation from the people of color who live through the hatred to the people who intentionally or inadvertently create it. Second, all such groups need to relearn some global history. Given the deeply entrenched residual effects of European colonialism, there is zero chance that a white person living in Europe emerged untouched by that history.

Such history lessons in racism and privilege are unequivocally necessary because "a broadened, historical understanding of the origins of racism and the different ways in which it continues to manifest itself will show its craftiness but will also challenge its victims to draw intersectional solidarities" (Mangcu, 2017, p. 250). Indeed, anti-racist groups grappling with an epistemology of privilege struggle specifically to identify the ways this privilege functions in their own lives (Sholock, 2012; Yu, 2012); thus any effort to change this epistemology must embrace this struggle as both self-reflective (i.e., how do I

know) and content driven (i.e., what do I know).

In addition to the "being different from other whites" discourse, Puchner and Markowitz experienced perpetuation of racism in other ways. For example, they heard members of the group make other racist statements and, in some cases, encourage each other's racism. Also, what Puchner and Markowitz picked up on, undoubtedly, was only a subset of the racist discourse that occurred.

However, journal data also indicate that participating in the group challenged racism as well and may have had a positive anti-racist impact on some group members. For example, evidence of the potential impact of simply reading the book can be seen in a journal excerpt from Puchner about a group member's reaction to the reading:

One woman said . . . that she's so old, and as she's reading this she's wondering how she could have missed this practically her whole life, and how many people she must have hurt.

In addition to learning via reading, the following journal entry from Markowitz reflects on and potentially illustrates learning from the discussion group more generally:

With this group, I did start to think about all the conflict I've had with black people. . . . I responded to . . . situations with anger and that anger escalated the problem rather than helped it. I am pretty ashamed that I can't control my anger and that my anger is part of white privilege. So it was interesting to explore that. I did share with the group my story with A and how I wished I had handled the situation differently. [Facilitator] asked me how I would handle that differently and I think I said something about not being so angry so that I could have asked more questions. . . . When I think about the anger, I think it relates to a sense of self-righteousness: "It's not OK to treat me this way." The anger keeps me from curiosity and being better able to explore the situation from another person's perspective.

Members also challenged each other, increasingly, as time went on. Puchner herself was challenged several times. Here's one example from her journaling:

So then I said I thought that if there is a black person in the room and a white person says something racist then I thought it was really important to say something in the moment, just to disrupt, but that if not, it might be okay to wait and talk to the person afterwards. So then [facilitator] said . . . that we need to act for ourselves, and not act for others. In other words, I should not assume the black person needs me to act on their behalf.

Participants sometimes helped each other with challenges. Here is an excerpt from Puchner's journal that shows Puchner initiating a challenge that was then taken up by others:

Also on the topic of insensitive things [we had said or done in the past], N told a story of how she was working with a group of men, maybe at work, many of whom were black, and she called them "boys," as in something like: "Now you boys can work on this now" or something. And a white guy . . . said to her that he feels uncomfortable when she calls them boys. She believes he was confronting her and exposing himself as the one feeling bad but actually doing it for the black guys. She also says at one point "and I know I am innocent because my husband and I watch sports and we always refer to the players as boys in a sports context so that's what I meant." . . . Then I ask N . . . what she meant when she said "but I know I am innocent" because that had bothered me a lot. She explains herself, without seeming to get my point, and referring back to the sports context. I sit back, but someone else suggests the athletes are mostly black too, and she again responds without quite seeming to understand, and then someone else follows up about intent versus impact.

The following excerpt from Markowitz's journal (in response to Puchner's journal) also shows group members challenging each other, as well as Markowitz's appreciation of parts of the book:

The chapter we read that night really talked about how as whites, we want to reject whiteness or anything that puts us into a group. We want to feel like individuals. . . . These prompts were trying to show us how we adopt racist beliefs unknowingly. I felt frustrated in my group because S started off with our first prompt, talking about how well, she really IS different from other whites because she grew up in Europe and then she talked about the experience at the middle school and lunch. This event was clearly very important to her at convincing her that she was not racist. I reiterated that the book discusses how part of the problem was that whites want to believe they are different and how it's important for us to notice how we, as whites, do benefit as a group. S, however, was unwilling to see her claim of difference as a problem and so J and I spent most of the group trying to convince S that she, like me and J, are racist. . . . I want to believe I'm different too so I really appreciated this chapter and how it really calls us to examine that desire to be different or the "good white" person.

In reading these particular journal excerpts, Roseboro acknowledged the self-reflective dialogic cycle that emerged. Such a cycle is critical to the evolution of any anti-racist group. As much as she noted the presence of their self-reflective commentary, she also noted the isolated nature of that dialogue. Several of the participants wondered about people of color they may have hurt, dismissed, or ignored. Yet none of them commented on reaching out or reaching back to find those people, to extend the dialogue, to hear those truths.

Without doing so, we miss the detail or the content of those exchanges. Anti-racist work is more than just self-reflective. It is also content bearing—there are facts that we must unveil, experiences that we must witness. If we never move from the realm of self-reflection, our narratives remain parallel, not integrated and thus not capable of cultivating intersectional solidarities. Without such solidarities, we diminish our capacity to heal.

Critique 3: A Way for Whites to Assuage Their Guilt and to Gain Recognition and Validation

Another important criticism that has been leveled at whites-only anti-racist groups is that such groups are mainly a way to make whites feel less guilty. "White folks need to ask themselves if they're doing this work because it's a moral imperative, or because they want accolades and kudos to soothe their white guilt" (Delgado, 2017, para. 16).

Delgado went further to say that whites shouldn't gain anything—recognition, ego, validation—from their work as allies and that whites have to be uncomfortable for such work to be

appropriate. Prinsloo (2016) likewise suggested that one needs to ask the question of who anti-racist initiatives are for, to avoid or avert strategies that serve primarily to assuage white guilt as opposed to actually achieving change. In the context of decolonization, Tuck and Yang (as cited in Prinsloo, 2016, p. 166) refer to such practices as "moves to innocence"; such moves make the colonizer feel less guilty without actually having to give up power.

Puchner's participation in the group was problematic from this perspective. Yes, she was challenged a few times and felt uncomfortable at some points, but overall, the group served a validating function for her. She enjoyed participating in the group—indeed, her journal is infused with comments on how much she enjoyed various aspects of the meeting, what her mood was at various points, and what others thought of her. She compares her participation in the program to therapy—you push yourself and you feel challenged and you go to some difficult internal places, but ultimately you feel better about yourself. Puchner reflects a bit on these issues in the following journal entry:

> These sessions . . . seem a bit like therapy to me. They are therapeutic for me, in fact, and they are making me grow. But this is exactly what the [Delgado article] is warning us of—why should we use race to sit around and delve into our psyches and grow?

Markowitz also feels she benefited from and enjoyed the group, though her perspective differs some from Puchner's. For Markowitz, the most salient form of satisfaction came from being part of a group of like-minded individuals who are interested in racial justice. Thus what she gained was a sense of community and a feeling of empowerment about going out and accomplishing things.

For whites to profit from racism is very problematic, but tensions exist that make it very hard to determine whether the kind of profit experienced by Puchner and Markowitz, and likely others in the group, make the group more harmful than beneficial. Learning and struggle tend to make you feel good about yourself. Members challenged each other, and most participants did likely find the experience difficult at times, but ultimately, a legitimate question might be, If learning is the goal, is it realistic to have a criterion of not making people feel good about themselves?

This problem also brings us back to the issue of pedagogical compromise—if you make the experience too miserable, no one will come, and if no one comes, then arguably the outcome is worse. Indeed, the group in which Puchner and Markowitz participated lost between one-third and one-half of the original participants from beginning to end, and the facilitators said that was normal, which may indicate that just reading the book and participating in initial discussions were too much of a challenge for some.

Interestingly, and perhaps ironically as well, the book used in the whites-only anti-racist group argued that eliminating white guilt and moving toward more productive use of energy is an important part of anti-racism work for whites. Puchner journaled about one of the book chapters that made this argument:

> The author talks about not knowing how to "be herself once I recognized how race and class had affected me" (36). Also, that she needed "to figure out a more viable way of living" in order to "feel centered," which is what I want to do around race (36). "We want to face the effects that privilege has had on people in our country, but our relationship to this work remains strained. Our lack of resolution and our incomplete recovery from the guilt can follow us and create problems even in our efforts to face our dis-ease" (37).

It is precisely this acknowledgment of what is absent—the intersecting dialogue outside of this particular anti-racist group—that points to how whites-only anti-racist groups must strengthen their work. This work occurs in relationship—relationship with our histories and each other. And while isolating race-based groups can be necessary for solidarity building, they fall short if those discussions never connect to the Othered beyond the group. This is not new work—decades ago, Bernice Johnson Reagon (1983) reminded us of the importance of solidarity building across groups:

> I've never been this high before. I'm talking about the altitude. There is a lesson in bringing people together where they can't get enough oxygen, then having them try to figure out what they're going to do when they can't think properly. I'm serious about that. There probably are some people here who can breathe, because you were born in high altitudes and you have big lung cavities. But when you bring people in who have not had the environmental conditioning, you got one group of people who are in a strain—and the group of people who are feeling fine are trying to figure out why you're staggering around. (p. 356)

And perhaps more important, Reagon took us to task for assuming that any "-only" group can do persistent, authentic work in hiding: "There's no chance you can survive by staying inside the *barred* room" (p. 358) but, while in the space, soak up the nurture, the love, the support. Do so knowing that when you leave that space, you leave to challenge, to confront, to undo the inequities that make such spaces necessary.

Critiques 4 and 5: Accountability to People of Color and Whites Using Racism to Gain Resources

An additional concern Delgado (2017) raised is that some whites-only anti-racist groups are not held accountable to people of color. The power of the master narrative and the pernicious nature of racism mean that whites, no matter how well intended, cannot adequately police their own attempts at anti-racism; their position of power in a racist society blinds them to what they need to see (DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2014; Leonardo & Porter, 2010).

Thus whites-only anti-racist groups must pay people of color to provide accountability—that is, to have input into and monitor the curriculum, methods, and results. Receiving input is only part of the solution, however, as listening to the input and working with monitors and facilitators to make sure challenges to the master narrative are occurring must also happen.

Finally, Delgado (2017) pointed to the important problem of the groups using racism to give resources to whites. In doing so, the groups fit into the common scenario of programs that purport to help solve social justice problems but that in fact benefit the supposed helpers more than those who need help and that contain hidden costs to the people they are supposed to be helping.

Cann and McCloskey (2017) used counterstorying to show how a tutoring program that paired white college students with low-income children of color was problematic not only because the college students profited greatly, in terms of résumé items, commodifiable experience, praise, and respect they gained from "helping" poor children,

but also because the struggling schools, with majority students of color, used their own monetary resources for the tutoring program to cover such items as after-school snacks, facility use, and extra insurance. The dominant narratives around university–community partnerships focus on the positive role of universities in helping poor communities and ignore the enormous benefits for the colleges (Cann & McCloskey, 2017).

In the case of the whites-only anti-racist group, this problem is difficult to solve, because even if one were to decide the groups are otherwise harmless, they will always use resources that might be used for something else. Having a system whereby the white facilitators are volunteers and the space is donated helps.

Another way to mitigate or partially offset the resources spent on whites is for whites in the groups to give money to activist groups run by people of color. Organizers of whites-only anti-racist groups cannot force participants to donate money, but they can emphasize the importance of such donations and of being very careful about which organizations donations are benefiting.

Conclusions

It is very hard for whites-only groups to avoid the master narrative, even when well-intentioned whites are determined to be an anti-racist force. We live with the narratives that bind us, when those narratives are difficult and when they are liberating. The absence of people of color in all-white groups makes counterstories impossible. On the surface, then, whites-only anti-racist groups seem antithetical to the point of CRT and moving forward with critical dialogue about race and racism. But, at the very least, such groups can be spaces where a presumption of trust leads white folks into the conversation.

Oore, Gagnon, and Bourgeois (2013) argued that whites in negotiation with other whites cultivated stronger in-group trust and thus led to more positive outcomes for the negotiation. If we frame anti-racist groups as a negotiation of power, place, and identity, then this in-group trust could perhaps be most salient. In whites-only groups, there is no perceived threat in the dialogue, no subsequent racialized threat that supports the perception, and no automatic suspicion of other group members prior to the speaking of a single word. In short, whites-only groups remove the situational threat created in mixed-racial groupings.

Without such threats, the possibility for focused dialogue can increase.

Also, whites-only anti-racist groups are a supplement to and not a replacement for cross-racial dialogue. Entering the conversation with in-group members they are more likely to trust and being challenged may help prepare some whites to be better participants in cross-racial conversation. DiAngelo and Sensoy (2014) argued that current attempts to make cross-racial dialogue "safe" allow and often lead to whites claiming violence in reaction to personal stories of people of color and position people of color as violent. Such conversations maintain the silence of people of color, force people of color to listen to personal stories of whites imbued with the master narrative, and maintain white supremacy.

The larger question remains, however: How do we simultaneously honor the voices, knowledge, and experience of people of color in dialogue about race if we resort to whites-only groups? CRT, perhaps, brings us back to an answer. Talking about race is soul-searching, complex work, and we can never ascribe singular space to it. Whites-only anti-racist groups are not replacements for cross-racial dialogue, and they will never be a totally satisfactory way of counteracting the master narrative.

However, given the problems with cross-race dialogue, and the potential for whites to recognize and challenge the stories told by each other, they may be a space that enables some pushback against the master narrative. The small cracks created by these contestations may increase the potential for some whites to listen to, hear, and trust counterstories when they encounter them in the future and hence for incremental racial progress in schools and other institutional settings.

If there is a place for whites-only anti-racist groups in schools and other venues, we must not ignore concerns such as Delgado's, and these groups must be constantly interrogated and subject to a variety of tests. For example, in addition to issues of accountability and resources already raised, the materials used need to be constantly interrogated to determine whose voices are made the authority on race. Using a white-authored book like Tochluk's may hold some pedagogical advantages. But it also makes a white person the authority on race, and the white person is profiting monetarily and in other ways from racism.

Also, other pros and cons need to be constantly interrogated—does the learning that occurred justify the group? Are the negatives adequately offset by the participants gaining in their understanding of racism and becoming a bit less racist in their interactions with other people? Or do the participants need to make bigger changes, which are arguably more likely to stem from a cross-race group? And what kinds of actions on the part of white participants would be big enough to make up for the resources expended and other problems? A definitive answer to these questions is not attainable, but it still needs to be grappled with. This excerpt from Markowitz's journal highlights some of the difficult questions:

> Even after all the weeks, I wonder if the group has been helpful at getting me to confront my own racism. . . . Was the emphasis on "I" and feelings useful? Was being with other white women who were willing to confront their racism helpful? How could we measure "help"? Structurally, I still benefit from all the things I benefitted from prior to the group. I'm not giving up my wealth or where I live or where I work, so if I don't change my structural position, then how can I measure whether the group has been helpful?

And finally, we embrace this work with the understanding that "coalition work is not work done in your home. Coalition work has to be done in the streets. And it is some of the most dangerous work you can do" (Reagon, 1983, p. 359). As much as whites-only anti-racist groups can serve as semi-safe spaces for whites to confront their own racial privilege, such groups launch us (willingly or with trepidation) into coalition building. Only there, at the intersection, can we change the course of history.

Note

[1] Although this is not a research paper, we sought and received human subjects review board approval to use journal excerpts in this essay.

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