



WHITE CAMPUS ACTIVITIES PROFESSIONALS NAVIGATING DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION EFFORTS: A CRITICAL WHITENESS PERSPECTIVE

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Guided by critical perspectives on race and whiteness, this qualitative study explores how White campus activities professionals navigate diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts in relation to their privileged racial identity. Using a phenomenological approach, the findings reveal a common thread of white comfort and solidarity within campus activities at both the individual and institutional levels. Furthermore, this study offers recommendations for how White professionals can move beyond white comfort by integrating theories and perspectives of critical whiteness into their daily practice in campus activities. In doing so, White professionals can begin to disrupt normative actions, behaviors, and attitudes of whiteness within themselves, their teams, and institutions.

INTRODUCTION

In her seminal book, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*, Beverly Tatum (1997) states that whiteness, or the assumed superiority of White people, is reaffirmed through cultural images and messages and is like smog in the air. At times, “the smog is so thick it is visible, other times it is less apparent, but always, day in and day out, we are breathing it in. None of us would introduce ourselves as ‘smog-breathers,’ but if we live in a smoggy place, how can we avoid breathing the air?” (p. 6). Indeed, there is no way to avoid breathing in the smog. We all live, work, and operate in a society that is structured by whiteness, and higher education, like most U.S. institutions, was founded upon white ideologies and prospers by reinforcing these white cultural norms (Patton, 2016). Marilyn Frye (1983) describes these white cultural norms as a deeply ingrained way of being in the world. Whiteness shapes actions, social practices, and dispositions and thus constitutes a part of the “know-how” or practical knowledge of navigating daily life. Leonardo (2004) supports this claim by sharing that although whiteness was created centuries ago, White people recreate it on a daily basis at both the individual and institutional levels.

In order to shed light on these racial inequities, the field of campus activities should be attentive to the underlying systems and structures of dominance and power relations that manifest in our daily actions and behaviors. In fact, as part of NACA’s updated research agenda, scholars have articulated the need to rigorously examine historical and traditional campus programs using a lens of diversity, equity, and inclusion. If not critically examined, campus activities professionals “may unintentionally sustain a continued marginalization of minoritized students and the inequitable power structures that create such marginalization – along with an environment of white and male supremacy that underlies both” (Rosch et al., 2021, p. 59). From how we¹ advise our student programming boards, to developing workshops and programs, to leading teams and departments, campus activities professionals, in particular White people, should actively work to push the boundaries of our understanding of whiteness and the racial smog that permeates the fabric of higher education and student affairs.

¹ I use the words “our” and “we” to indicate that I am also part of the white racial majority, thus positioning myself directly in this work. In doing so, my intention is not to exclude but rather to put the focus on White professionals who should be doing the heavy lifting in the pursuit of racial equity in higher education.

I argue that now, more than ever, the field of campus activities needs bold, courageous, and critically conscious White leaders who are willing to fully engage in racial equity and inclusion efforts to transform their institutions. We need campus activities professionals who are ready to get their hands dirty to address rooted issues of oppression and injustice within higher education and student affairs. This begins with critical reflection and analysis and moves from understanding to action (Shields, 2010). The purpose of this critical qualitative study was to explore how White campus activities professionals navigate diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts at their institutions in relation to their privileged racial identity. Using a Critical Whiteness Studies framework, this study reveals how these individuals navigate, challenge, and/or reinforce whiteness in campus activities and offers insight and recommendations for how White campus activities professionals can begin thinking about their work differently in relation to their whiteness.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In their article on student belonging, Peck et al. (2022) make a case that “infusing” diversity, equity, and inclusion into our work is not enough; “it must become our work” (p. 5). Indeed, campus activities professionals must be critically conscious of our racial identity and have a vision and commitment to infusing DEI efforts into all aspects of our work, including programming, policy development, advising, and supervision. The core of diversity and equity work is inclusion. Campus activities professionals should strive to create an environment where “all students, regardless of background and individual attributes, feel valued by their respective institutions and effectively connected to and within them” (Peck et al., 2022, p. 8). Historically, Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) have shouldered the responsibility for transforming institutions to be more inclusive. Under their leadership, significant progress has been made to advance issues of racial equity and inclusion in higher education, particularly at predominantly white institutions (Valverde, 2003). On the contrary, White professionals have the choice to engage or disengage in DEI issues due to the safety and comfort of being White, thus reinforcing our privileged position. An aspect of whiteness that plagues higher education today is white solidarity – the unspoken agreement among White people to protect white advantage and dominance (DiAngelo, 2011).

The goal of white solidarity is “to ensure that other White people do not feel targeted or any type of racial discomfort. White solidarity is maintained by remaining silent about anything that exposes the advantage of whiteness and tacit agreement to remain racially united in the protection of White supremacy. To break white solidarity is to break rank” (DiAngelo, 2011, p. 58). In light of this, whiteness is maintained through the lack of engagement and critical consciousness of White people. Critical consciousness involves critical reflection and action on the part of the individual (Freire, 1970). Critically conscious leaders are “committed to lifelong learning and growth, to recognizing and eliminating prejudice and oppression, to increasing awareness, to facilitating change, and to building inclusive communities” (Brown, 2004, p. 92). If White campus activities professionals are to foster inclusive excellence throughout their institutions, they should concern themselves with racial equity, critical consciousness, and social change (Adams & Bell, 2016). This journey begins with deeply understanding one’s own racial privileges and biases and how our positionality influences and shapes our work in campus activities.

Whiteness in Campus Life

The acculturation into whiteness is evident on college campuses today through the use of symbols, rituals, and activities. As Tichavakunda (2021) states, “It would come as little surprise to anyone studying higher education that race matters for the college experience. Campus life – joy through recreation, celebration, and leisure, in this case – is racialized” (p. 313). This is most evident at U.S. institutions, particularly those located in Southern states that have historical statues and buildings named after people (almost always White men) who were proponents of racial discrimination and slavery. Furthermore, disputes about racist university mascots continue to take place. These disputes often involve BIPOC members who find these mascots to be racist and stereotypical, whereas White alumni and students express that the mascots are deeply tied to their identity and the identity of the institution. These cultural symbols function as physical manifestations of the institution’s values, which directly affect the campus climate (Milem, Chang, & Antonio, 2005). Similarly, Tichavakunda’s (2021) research on Black joy describes how Black students experience campus activities, in particular homecoming festivities, in relation to their

White peers. He suggests that “such findings demonstrate that what are implicitly understood as ‘traditional’ or ‘mainstream’ facets of campus life are veiled terms for White campus life” (p. 314). These “mainstream” programs and activities structure the campus culture and activities, thus reinforcing whiteness in higher education.

Over the years, there have been many initiatives attempting to address racism on college campuses. Unfortunately, many of these interventions have limitations in improving cross-racial group dynamics in higher education. The success of the programs is defined by educating people about diversity, and this is subtly, but importantly, different from understanding and addressing the roots of racism. For example, there are several initiatives within campus activities aimed at increasing awareness of racial differences, such as diversity celebrations and cultural heritage programming. While these initiatives help create space to enter the conversation on racial differences, they do not always address systems or structures. Awareness does not imply a critical analysis of racial oppression. This is a key difference between diversity programming and the anti-racism movement. Many institutions find pride in promoting these diversity efforts; however, this misconception fails to address the core of racism - the system of white supremacy. As Peck et al. (2022) remind us, “As campus activities professionals continue to engage in the anti-racism movement, they need to examine how they are changing their organizational structures [e.g., budgets, policies, marketing strategies] and staff behaviors [e.g., mentoring, advising, leadership training approaches] to improve access to educational opportunities” (p. 9). To move beyond awareness, it is necessary to understand racism as systemic and make the invisible visible by highlighting the ways in which our institutions structure and recreate the unmeritocratic privileges White people enjoy (Evatt-Young & Bryson, 2021; Ortiz & Rhoads, 2000; Tichavakunda, 2021). As White campus activities professionals work to challenge and disrupt these white norms, we must remember that our whiteness is deeply embedded into our daily interactions and decision-making in campus activities. The degree to which racialized experiences are transparent to White people is vital in understanding the nuances of how race and privilege play out in our work (Bonilla-Silva, 2001).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS) guided this research. CWS reveals the normalized social structures and systems that continually recreate white supremacy and privilege. Importantly, CWS is an epistemological and methodological lens derived from Critical Race Theory (CRT). According to Solórzano and Yosso (2002), CRT “foregrounds race and racism in all aspects of the research” (p. 24). Furthermore, CRT is a tool to expose inequities that exist within social structures that might otherwise be rendered invisible. Once exposed, “campus activities professionals can alleviate them by working to create anti-racist environments” (Peck et al., 2022, p. 9). Building on CRT perspectives, Critical Whiteness Studies scholars view whiteness as a system existing within a social, political, historical, and economic context. Doane and Bonilla-Silva (2003) share that CWS “reverses the traditional focus of research on race relations by concentrating the attention upon the socially constructed nature of white identity and the impact of whiteness upon intergroup relations” (p. 3). CWS challenges dominant ideology and critically examines how the unmeritocratic and unwarranted privileges of whiteness are enacted, normalized, and maintained within society and institutions.

Towards a Critical Whiteness Perspective

Although many higher education scholars and practitioners use the language of “white privilege” and “whiteness” interchangeably, I intentionally use the term “critical whiteness” to undergird the systemic and structural nature of white supremacy in higher education. Cabrera (2017) coined the term “white immunity” as a way to highlight the limitations and pitfalls of traditional notions of white privilege. White privilege is most often described as an invisible knapsack of unearned advantages that White people are unaware of (McIntosh, 1989). This definition of white privilege presents an entry point for White people to examine and reflect on our own racial identity and positionality. Too often, however, the discourse of white privilege stops there.

White privilege remains focused solely on White individuals and their identities rather than undertaking a critical examination of systems and structures of white supremacy. This approach individualizes racism instead of conceptualizing it as a systemic reality (Leonardo, 2004). Cabrera (2017) refers to this as white privilege pedagogy.

gy and argues that it can lead to a distraction from racial justice. When White people are asked to reflect on their racial identity, the focus devolves into the good White/ bad White binary, which “often leads to very superficial and simplistic analysis of privilege” (Applebaum, 2010, p. 29). Focusing solely on white privilege provides a narrow approach because it examines the “who” of whiteness and not the “how” of whiteness (Levine-Rasky, 2000). Taking a critical whiteness approach means examining and dismantling the structural and systemic components that sustain whiteness as the dominant ideology.

METHODOLOGY

This critical qualitative study employed a phenomenological approach to illuminate the frequently invisible phenomenon of whiteness that continually recreates white supremacy and privilege in higher education. Critical qualitative inquiry is ultimately about recognizing power dynamics in order to shed light on the taken-for-granted perspectives that perpetuate unjust and oppressive social conditions (Cannella & Lincoln, 2012). At the heart of this work, the phenomenon that needed to be brought to consciousness and transformed was whiteness. Therefore, I combined a phenomenological approach with critical qualitative inquiry to guide this study and explore the phenomenon of whiteness in campus activities.

Researcher Positionality

The goal of a qualitative researcher in representing others’ perspectives is to do so authentically with results that stay true to the participants’ views (Glesne, 2011). While the intent of my research was to disrupt and decenter whiteness as the norm, I, as a White researcher, had to actually center my own whiteness in order to move beyond the boundaries and constraints of racial social constructs. Therefore, the process of self-reflexivity became crucial throughout the entire research process. As a White, gay, cis-gender man, I am positioned within society and higher education to reap the benefits of my privilege. Before transitioning to a faculty role, I worked in student affairs for over twelve years, primarily in the areas of campus activities and leadership development. Growing up in a small, conservative town in the South, I always desired to be perceived as a “good White person,” and I never considered myself to be racist or part of the “problem.” I most certainly fit the mold of a white progressive, a term that DiAngelo (2018) describes as any White person who thinks they are not racist, or is less racist... or already “gets it.” Through much reading, dialogue, and deep reflection, I developed a much more robust and complex understanding of my whiteness. The dichotomy of good versus bad began to shatter once I started to own my whiteness and shift my perspectives of what it means to engage in diversity, equity, and inclusion work as a White person. In relation to this study, I used self-reflection tools, such as memo writing, to ask myself similar questions that I asked the participants. For example, I thought deeply about how I feel about being white and how those feelings influence my behaviors and actions as a campus activities professional. I also reflected on the times that my whiteness has benefited me and how I have perpetuated systems of whiteness in my work and personal life. It was important for me to grapple with these questions, and more, throughout the research process to remain reflexive and grounded in my own experiences while (un)learning and engaging with the participants.

Participant Recruitment and Selection

This study involved ten participants representing a wide range of institutional types and geographic regions across the United States. Participants were recruited using social media, in particular, two Facebook groups: 1) Higher Education Professionals, and 2) Student Affairs Professionals Dismantling White Privilege. Participants were selected using criterion sampling in order to identify a small, specific group to interview based on a set criterion (Creswell, 2014; Patton, 2015). In order to participate, individuals must have self-identified as White and served in an administrative role at their institution. Additionally, participants must have been engaged in some form of equity work at their institution. I felt this was an important criterion for the study because it provided a backdrop to engage participants throughout the interview process because they were able to provide examples of how they put this work into action. Although the participants’ racial identities were the same, the group represented a diverse range of other social identities, including gender identity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, and religion/spirituality. Furthermore, the participants’ institutional demographics represented a variety of institutional types ranging from large, public research institutions to small liberal arts institutions to private

Ivy Leagues to community colleges. Participants were geographically located in regions throughout the United States from the Deep South to New England to the Midwest and to the Pacific Northwest.

Data Collection and Analysis

Guided by a phenomenological approach (Vagle, 2016; van Manen, 2001), I conducted three rounds of individual in-depth interviews with the ten participants (30 interviews total). These private interviews took place via Zoom, a remote video conferencing service, and were audio recorded for transcription. I used a semi-structured interview protocol with the purpose of capturing participants' descriptions and stories in order to interpret the meaning of the phenomenon under study (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008). Questions were framed in the context of motives, values, concerns, perceptions, and needs in relation to the participants' whiteness (Glesne, 2011), and I remained focused on listening to the participants' experiences to lead me through the interview. At the conclusion of each interview round, I sent the audio recordings to a professional online transcription service within 48 hours of the interview. Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant to ensure confidentiality throughout the process. After the interviews were transcribed, I read each transcription in detail concurrently with interview notes, checking for errors and developing preliminary analyses of the data.

In staying true to the phenomenological analysis process, I used Yin's (2016) data analysis framework to guide me through the data and interpretation process. The phases included: (1) Compiling, (2) Disassembling, (3) Reassembling, (4) Interpreting, and (5) Concluding. This approach was both comprehensive and useful to aid in the analysis and to apply Vagle's (2016) whole-parts-whole process as a lens to highlight the focal meanings embedded within the data.

FINDINGS

The purpose of this critical qualitative study was to explore how White campus activities professionals navigate DEI efforts at their institutions using critical whiteness perspectives. Consequently, the common thread that emerged from the data analysis process was white comfort. White comfort occurs when it is easier for White people to discuss racial topics that are not in close proximity to them, both emotionally and physically. As a result, White people choose to bask in the glory of our complacency rather than challenging our preconceived ideas of race. The findings of this study reveal that white comfort occurs at both the individual and institutional levels. In this section, I highlight the four themes that emerged from this study and interweave points of analysis using critical whiteness perspectives to illuminate the complexities of whiteness in campus activities.

“Too Close to Talk About”

The participants discuss barriers that exist while engaging in DEI work. In particular, Sue, a White woman working at a public research institution in the Southeast, states that proximity can be a barrier at her institution. Sue highlights white comfort at the institutional level when she says, “From a campus perspective, the institution does better when we participate in dialogues around national events, particularly when those national events aren't occurring on our campus. We can talk about race as long as it doesn't involve any of us.” When institutions choose not to engage in racial topics that are happening at the local level, it feeds into white comfort because it allows race to remain an abstract, objective idea that White people do not see themselves embedded within. Dan, a White man working at a mid-sized public research institution in the Mid-West, recalls his experience with race discussions on his campus:

From a bigger perspective, I think White people acknowledge that racism exists, but their definition of racism is based on White folks in costumes carrying pitchforks and torches. They see the extreme view, like perhaps a lynching, as the only definition of racism. There's not a willingness or acceptance to recognize that there are smaller and cumulative things that are compounding the same series of situations. The same daily actions or behaviors over time can be just as impactful and negative as something much more extreme. When racism happens right here on campus, it becomes too close to talk about. If we're going to question things, it's going to require a whole lot of work. Perhaps the idea is that we're not ready to do the work, or maybe we're not motivated to do the work.

Dan's story of racism becoming "too close to talk about" supports DiAngelo's (2011) notion of white fragility. That is, when topics of race or racism become too personal, White people shut down or disengage. It is easier to pretend that nothing is wrong rather than leaning into discomfort and addressing racism head-on, thus basking in white comfort.

"One of Us"

From a different perspective, participants were asked to reflect on when it was safest to talk about race on their campuses. The participants' responses illustrate a range of reactions - complacency, hesitation, and frustration. John, a White man working at a public research institution in New England, shared that it is easier for him to talk about race when he is in mostly white settings. He shares that, "It is easier not to confront something or push the topic of race when I'm surrounded by other White people because we have a common experience. We share a similar entry point into the conversation." John's unwillingness to discuss or confront topics of race in mostly white spaces allows him to maintain his white comfort and solidarity with other White people. Audrey, a White woman working at a community college in the South, exhibited hesitation because she struggles with talking to other White people about race, but she is trying to get better... "The people who really need to know about racism are people who look like me and you. I struggle with that still. I make mistakes all the time, and I have to ask myself... next time, what can I do better next time?"

In yet a different approach, Amy, a White woman at a private liberal arts college in the Pacific Northwest, challenges white comfort. She shares the following:

There's a really vivid memory in my mind of when I went to a faculty member's office to have a specific conversation, and he started unloading his emotions on me. I thought to myself, what are you doing right now? What is this? Who do you think I am for you in this space? What signals am I giving to this person where they can't cry in public places, but they automatically feel they can confide in me? I think they made a lot of assumptions about me because I'm white... They're like, "Oh, my walls can come down a little bit because you're one of us." I certainly walked away from that conversation with more questions than answers.

In her story of meeting with a White faculty member, Amy seems frustrated that a White colleague would immediately assume that she is on their side simply because they are both white. This story represents white solidarity in that White people assume that they are all on the same "team" and can let their guard down, as if creating a deeper level of trust among White people. Although the participants approach discussions of race in various ways, they are all positioned in the same way - you are "one of us."

"Giving Something Up"

Perhaps the most pervasive act of white comfort in higher education is inaction. Several of the participants discussed their experience with whiteness within the context of committee work. Liz, a White woman at a private Ivy League school in New England, describes her experience serving on a campus-wide diversity and inclusion committee:

We got together and talked about how things were an issue but never tied down any concrete things that we would do. That was very frustrating for me; we just talked ourselves in circles. It was one of those committees where there weren't clear expectations about what the committee was supposed to be doing and what we had the power to do. We would meet faithfully, you know, a bunch of well-meaning White folks, but nothing ever came of it. None of us had to give anything up to change things... We could talk our well-meaning White people talk as much as we wanted and say, "Oh, isn't it a tragedy?" and then go to lunch and go back to the world as it was.

Liz's experience serving on this committee is yet another example of white comfort. The committee met on a regular basis but never "had to give anything up to change things." Ironically, the inaction from the committee members led to the reinforcement of whiteness at their institution, the very thing they were trying to work against.

What's in it for me?

In the fight for racial equity and inclusion, White people have to be willing to give up our power and control. However, the majority of White professionals are fearful of “giving something up,” as highlighted in Liz’s previous story about committee membership. As another participant acknowledged, “There have been times when I’ve seen White colleagues benefit from their whiteness under the guise of student advocacy. For example, they offer to help BIPOC students because they want the students to become reliant on them.” White people’s desire for BIPOC individuals to have to rely on them manifests in very real ways. White professionals may carry with them an internal mindset of, “what’s in it for me?” while trying to be the best White person they can be. This phenomenon was best illustrated in Rebecca’s story of asking a Colleague of Color to join her in a meeting to have a difficult conversation with a Student of Color. Rebecca, a White woman working at a private liberal arts school in the Mid-Atlantic, shared the following:

I feel motivated to do the [DEI] work, but there are times I’ve felt uncomfortable in making decisions, especially when having a difficult conversation with a Student of Color. I felt like I was going to be perceived as, “Oh, they’re making this decision because she’s White, and I’m not.” So, I’ve had those moments where I’ve thought maybe if I bring a Person of Color alongside me in this conversation, it’ll go better. Or sometimes saying, “Hey, would you [a Colleague of Color] be willing to have this conversation with the student because thus far my interactions have not been positive, and I want this to end well for the student.”

Although well-intentioned, Rebecca’s decision to ask a Colleague of Color to join her in the meeting or to ask her colleague to have the difficult conversation instead of her is an example of white comfort. Rebecca rationalizes her decision by stating she “wants it to end well for the student,” yet in doing so, she actually places the burden back on her Colleague of Color. Instead of centering the Student and Colleague of Color in this situation, Rebecca does not want to feel any type of racial discomfort and prioritizes her own emotional well-being. Furthermore, Rebecca’s desire to be perceived as a “safe” White person with whom BIPOC students can confide is actually grounded in her own desire to maintain power (i.e., status and reputation) at her institution. Although subtle, whiteness manifests in daily interactions with students and colleagues in the ways White people advise, supervise, and lead committees and teams (Evatt-Young & Bryson, 2021).

DISCUSSION

The participants in this study shared their struggles and successes with navigating DEI efforts at their institutions. The findings underscore the importance for White campus activities professionals to not only recognize their whiteness, but to constantly develop and practice critical consciousness. That is, White professionals should possess the humility, vulnerability, and courage to center themselves as racial subjects of critique. Assuming that one has “arrived” at some mystical destination of racial equity is the first sign that the individual has not developed critical consciousness (Freire, 1970), and serves to reify whiteness. As Hayes and Juárez (2009) remind us, “when you show your whiteness, you are not entitled to a good White person medal” (p. 740). As the findings indicate, when White professionals have a “what’s in it for me?” mentality, they center their own whiteness and seek to maintain power and control. Bell (1980) conceptualizes this as interest convergence theory meaning that racial equity for BIPOC communities will be pursued and advanced when they converge with the interests, needs, expectations, and ideologies of White people. Part of developing critical consciousness involves examining our biases and motives for engaging in racial equity work. The participants highlighted the power dynamics at play within higher education, and many, not all, recognized the first step in disrupting whiteness is talking about race. In doing so, White professionals will have to unlearn the white norms and customs that we are all so socialized into. Using Tatum’s (1997) language, White campus activities professionals must acknowledge the racial smog around us – see it, name it, and work courageously with BIPOC communities and White peers to clear the smog. As such, it would serve White professionals well to utilize Critical Whiteness Studies as a lens through which to approach their work in campus activities.

From an institutional perspective, White campus activities professionals must aim to disrupt white solidarity that exists within higher education. As DiAngelo (2011) suggests, breaking rank implies going against power

dynamics and challenging structures. To go against these structures is to potentially jeopardize your career and personal and institutional reputation. This perceived jeopardy or peril seemingly makes it too risky for White professionals to break the white solidarity that unconsciously exists at their institutions. Herein lies the perpetuation of white comfort in campus activities. As several participants indicated, they are afraid to lose credibility and are worried that their reputation will be tarnished if they challenge white norms. Consequently, they fail to realize that they are actually centering whiteness with these inactions. To overcome white comfort, White professionals should ask themselves when and how topics of race come up on their campuses. Who are the primary communicators and organizers of these racial issues? If White campus affiliates (i.e., students, administrators, faculty, and staff) are not somehow engaged in these efforts, then the institution is at risk of reifying whiteness by placing the burden back on BIPOC community members. Let me be clear, however, White people should not be the only ones leading the charge. Rather, we should be amplifying the voices of BIPOC communities and working alongside them to accomplish social change (Adams & Bell, 2016).

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Diversity, equity, and inclusion work is complex and messy. There is no “magic answer” to solving racism in higher education or society. White campus activities professionals must be cognizant not to overly simplify racial issues because it could further tokenize the voices of BIPOC individuals and remove our responsibility for both problems and solutions (Hytten & Warren, 2003). To follow, I offer recommendations for White campus activities professionals to begin thinking about their work differently in relation to their whiteness.

Personal Development

Personal development can come in many forms, such as reading, attending conferences or workshops, taking a class, listening to podcasts, and watching videos or documentaries. The critical piece is that personal development must be ongoing and consistent. As highlighted in the finding, “too close to talk about,” White professionals have to be comfortable being uncomfortable. Rather than seeing race as a distant, objective construct, we have to be introspective and situate ourselves within the larger system and structures of whiteness. As we engage in the personal development process, we must be willing and open to examine and suspend the power dynamics that exist in higher education. White professionals must be vulnerable to learning from anyone at any level of the institution, regardless of title, tenure, or position. Using a critical whiteness lens, we must ask ourselves, “Who defines truth?” and “Where and whom does knowledge come from?” If we think that knowledge can only emanate from faculty members or someone in a position of power, we have embraced a white-dominant way of thinking. When we shift the paradigm and embrace that knowledge and truth can come from anyone and anywhere at our institution (including students!), we begin to deconstruct power dynamics and open ourselves to new ways of knowing and being in the world. This way of thinking will help White campus activities professionals expand their white racial frame (Feagin, 2013) and begin to shift from white comfort to critical whiteness.

Staff Development

Extending beyond personal development, White campus activities professionals should also consider how they are leading and serving others. Research shows that higher education leaders’ workloads offer very little opportunity to reflect on their practice (Diaz, 2011). Consequently, leaders continue to operate in the same ways they always have. Critical reflection should occur periodically and be reinforced through institutionalized practices, especially in staff development. Using a critical whiteness approach, the goal of leaders and supervisors should be to empower staff members to engage in diversity, equity, and inclusion work on a daily or weekly basis. White campus activities professionals should aim to help their team members critically reflect on their experiences by speaking with them - not at them - and by asking open-ended questions to help them make deeper meaning of their experiences. One way White campus activities professionals can make race dynamics explicit is by integrating experiential learning activities focused on racial equity and inclusion into staff meetings. For example, consider inviting team members to compile a list of resources (articles, videos, books, podcasts, photos, etc.) centered on the topics of race, oppression, whiteness, and privilege. From there, integrate these resources and topics into staff meetings to prompt dialogue and reflection. While participating in these dialogues, reflect on

how your positionality, as both a White person and as a leader within the department, informs your interactions in the space. Take stock of how power dynamics are playing out and flowing amongst the team members and practice active listening. When you do speak, use “I” statements to take ownership of your words and actions and lean into racial discomfort. White leaders must understand that we have a choice about whether or not to engage in uncomfortable conversations about race; our BIPOC colleagues do not have this same privilege. Therefore, White campus activities professionals should role model racial humility and vulnerability in order to transform their teams and organizations.

Examining Power Dynamics

White campus activities professionals must be fully aware of the power we hold as both insiders and outsiders. This means challenging the system of whiteness while working within the system. In order to disrupt “business as usual,” we must view power as part of a larger, interlocking system that we are all embedded within. This involves understanding how our racial ideologies – tacit and “common sense” beliefs – influence our work in campus activities. For example, color-blind ideology finds virtue in not “seeing” race, which removes meaning and value from one’s lived experience (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). The goal is for White people to examine our racial ideologies and assumptions and begin to unlearn and reconstruct power dynamics that give agency to BIPOC individuals. In the context of campus activities, this means questioning our normal decision-making processes and operations. Whiteness cannot be undone over the matter of a workshop, course, or even a semester. Therefore, campus activities offices should re-frame programmatic efforts by eliminating the one-and-done approach to racial equity. Often, when campus activities offices use a one-and-done approach, whiteness prevails due to pushback from students, faculty, or staff. Comments such as, “Why is this a requirement?” “This isn’t my job,” or “I don’t have time for this,” run rampant through our teams and student organizations. When this tension arises, White campus activities professionals must not fall weak to criticism nor make half-hearted attempts to reconcile the issue. These are the moments when coalitions and infrastructure are critical to the success and sustainability of anti-racism work. To transform their institutions and organizations, White campus activities professionals should work alongside their BIPOC colleagues and other White leaders to build a culture that challenges “business as usual” and disrupts power dynamics.

Amplifying BIPOC Voices and Experiences

White campus activities professionals should be critically conscious of the racial differences that exist between BIPOC staff members and White staff members. There is no doubt that BIPOC staff experience work life very differently than their White peers, especially at predominantly white institutions (Gusa, 2010; Hurtado et al., 2012). Therefore, White leaders must be mindful not to take a cookie-cutter approach to racial equity work. In framing this approach, we have to give up the self-fulfilling prophecy that we must be perceived as a “good” White person. This does not mean holding any staff members less accountable than others, but rather, it involves taking an intersectional approach to leadership and modifying our approach with each team member to take into account their lived experiences and cultural differences. In fact, this intersectional approach to supervision and leadership increases motivation because people feel valued, seen, and heard in the context of their own lives. It promotes a culture of belonging and creates space for deeper connection and authenticity among staff members.

While in committee meetings, White leaders must recognize when and how we are taking space and voice away from our BIPOC Colleagues. When topics of racial equity and inclusion emerge in group discussion, White leaders should intentionally take a step back to allow our colleagues to share their personal experiences and ideas. In doing so, we must listen with humility about how our BIPOC colleagues are experiencing the campus climate and culture. Before speaking, we should pause (yes, pause!) and reflect on our individual thoughts and feelings about how we are experiencing campus as a White people. While speaking, White leaders should amplify and draw attention to the minoritized voices in the space by naming racial distinctions between how BIPOC individuals are experiencing campus and how we, as White people, experience campus. Illuminating and amplifying these racial differences - and most importantly, naming whiteness in the process - is crucial in creating a more inclusive campus environment.

Engaging Other White Leaders

One of the key findings from this study, “one of us,” supports DiAngelo’s (2011) concept of white solidarity in that White people have an unspoken agreement to protect white advantage and dominance. In order to move from white solidarity and comfort to racial equity and inclusion, White campus activities professionals have a responsibility to engage their White peers in topics related to race. White leaders should strategically name racial dynamics at their institutions and use their own whiteness to actively draw other White people into the conversation. The goal should be to help create awareness and critical consciousness, not to prove a point that we are “good” White people. Consequently, White leaders must make it a priority to speak with White peers rather than at them – something I call informed candidness. Informed candidness is communication that is grounded in humility and vulnerability yet is direct and informed by research or lived experience. When engaging other White leaders about race, we should strive to be critically aware of our whiteness throughout the conversation, yet not pretend to have unrealistic stocks of knowledge around racial equity. Hence, humility and vulnerability are needed in the process. White campus activities professionals should not be afraid of making mistakes with DEI efforts, but when we do reify our whiteness, we must immediately take ownership and not deflect or deny responsibility.

Furthermore, White leaders must focus on challenging whiteness in group settings, especially in committee work, in order to disrupt white solidarity. Simply put, we can no longer tiptoe around race. When we do this, we insulate our whiteness and seek to maintain our own racial comfort (Fine, 1997). The next time we are in a committee or group meeting, and topics of DEI emerge, White leaders should critically interrogate and examine how whiteness flows throughout the space using a critical whiteness lens. For example, ask yourself the following questions: 1) How are other White people in this space exhibiting characteristics (i.e., words, actions, behaviors) that do not align with racial equity and inclusion efforts? 2) How are we (myself included) perpetuating white comfort and solidarity in this space? Once noted, these examples provide opportunities for White campus activities professionals to engage with other White people about whiteness in more deeply and sincere ways. Importantly, these small interventions between White people can lead to a shift in critical consciousness for all parties involved. White campus activities professionals must consistently and explicitly name when and how racial dynamics play out in different spaces - whether in staff meetings, committee meetings, or supervision conversations. Conversations about race are difficult and complex, but they are critical in order to move racial equity efforts forward.

CONCLUSION

The first step in removing the racial smog described by Tatum (1997) in the opening paragraph is for White campus activities professionals to engage in critical reflection and dialogue around race. This means that White people must “come to understand that we are the problem, come to terms with what that really means, and act based on understanding” (Jensen, 2005, p. 93). The responsibility is on us, White campus activities professionals, to examine our own biases and assumptions and challenge our White peers to move beyond white comfort and solidarity. The recommendations offered in this article can assist White professionals with applying critical whiteness theory to our practice and developing critical consciousness to transform our institutions.

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