The (Identity) Development of White Anti-Racists

Lindsay Hammond

University of Vermont, HESA

March 2013

Abstract

A search for literature on the topic of "anti-racist education" reveals a large weight placed on White students to undergo previously unrealized racial identity development, consider their role in racism, and take an active role to reduce racist practices. Anti-racist education, therefore, seems inextricably bound to White identity development, and therefore, a review of this literature needs to include those articles that also focus on racial development and its relationship to, or role in, successful anti-racist education.

A Review of the Literature

Whiteness and Racial Identity Development

Authors and researchers of anti-racist education agree upon the necessity of White students (and teachers) to have a firm foundation and understanding of their whiteness and its impact and privileges as it relates to their identity development. Various authors note the importance of a positive view of one's White identity as integral to successful anti-racist work (Morelli & Spencer, 2000; Tatum, 1992; Thompson, 2003). Others conclude that White anti-racist role models are necessary for, but largely missing from, White students' anti-racist education (Smith & Redington, 2010).

Another common stance within the literature is that of the inherent racist nature of White students, no matter their anti-racist education level. Morelli and Spencer's (2000) end goal to "at least enable them [Whites] to be less racist" (p. 168), Olsson's (1997) call to "unlearn… racist conditioning…" and his provocative statement that White people have been taught "to maintain our white privilege" (p. 1) point toward the necessity of acknowledging that holding the identity of the White race has "political, social, and economic implications" (Lawrence, 1997, p. 109). The juxtaposition of the need for positive role models amidst the negative atmosphere leads many authors to the necessity of discussing barriers to White students' White identity development.

Barriers to White Racial Identity Development

Lawrence (1997) argues that White people are "continually… struggling to be nonracist White people living in a racist society" (p. 109). Pairing this with the silence regarding conversations of race in the classroom there are unmistakable barriers for all students, not just for White students. However, White students do seem to face a unique set of challenges for

discussing and re-inventing their White identities, and for living an anti-racist life. Tatum (1992), found that seeing role models (or those who have undergone positive racial identity development) leads to a more positive morale for White students (who see what could be) and for students of color (in providing a sense of hope for white allies). Her work shows the general negativity of, and disbelief in, a "good" White identity. The existence and use of this term has also been researched directly and indirectly (Case, 2012; Thompson, 2003). Case (2012) makes the point that "Whites usually do not think about themselves as having a race, and when they do, whiteness is associated with negative qualities" (p. 84). Thompson (2003) asserts a supporting position, namely that "White students and teachers must feel positive about their racial identity…" (p. 7), but that they "are uncomfortable with the implications of acknowledging white racism … [and are] tempted to position … [themselves] as 'good whites'" (p. 8).

On Being a "Good White"

        The problems of categorizing some White people as good and some as bad negates Applebaum and Stoik's (2000) idea that there are things that White people can change about their white-identities, but there are things they cannot change about their whiteness. Being the "good White" embraces White people's guilt as a good enough reason to be considered anti-racist, yet ignores the big societal issues, for they "did not *choose* to be born white in a racist society…" and they would "unchoose" it if they could (Thompson, 2003, p. 24). Being White, however, is not something that someone can "unchoose." Thompson also asserted the powerful concept that the simple desire to be a friend to people of color perpetuates race and racism and suggests that White people's ways of knowing how to be a friend are in the right, and therefore anti-racist. White people cannot forget race and racism, for "the alleviation of white guilt as an antiracist project keeps whiteness at the center of antiracism" (p. 24) where it cannot remain for

our society to move towards an enactment of antiracism. In the footnotes of Thompson's (2003) essay, she does note that *a* white person can be a friend of *a* person of color, but that it does not destroy racism. As cited in Thompson's notes, Lerone Bennett, Jr. states that this type of friendship "retain[s] roots in the mutually exclusive worlds of the oppressed and the oppressor" creating imagined cross-racial friendship and equity (p. 25).

Unlearning Whiteness

Many, if not most, articles on White racial identity development and White anti-racism agree that Whiteness and racism must be unlearned. As cited in Morelli and Spencer (2000), Grinter, in his argument for Anti-Racist Education (ARE) over Multi-Cultural Education (MCE) he says "that racism is an ideology based on learned attitudes of white superiority" (p. 168). With words like "dismantling" (Case, 2012, p. 80; Smith & Redington, 2010, p. 541), "unlearning" (Case, 2012, p. 80; Olsson, 1997, p. 1) images of "struggling" (Lawrence, 1997, p. 109), and an analogy to Alcoholic's Anonymous in which one enters into "recovery for life" (Case, 2012, p. 91) these all point to the extremely deep roots of racism in our society.

Deconstructionists maintain that in order to eradicate White dominance, white people "must crossover to blackness…" but, as Applebaum and Stoik (2000) discuss, a group of young girls who tried this and adopted Black identities. However, in this deconstructionist view of abandoning Whiteness, no one has proposed "realistic and constructive ways" to do so (p. 310) and they have assumed the performance of whiteness can be separated from the identity of being White. In the young women's performance they cannot "forgo all of their white privilege… [and] their suffering could not be compared to that which the black people in their community experienced…" (p. 310).

Necessary Components to Anti-Racist Learning and Progress

Another approach to unlearning racist ways, Tatum (1992) discusses the importance of discussing racism and prejudice in her classroom. Noting that racism affects us all, recognizing misconceptions, and realizing our responsibility to change are all central points that must be conveyed to a classroom before starting any anti-racist education. Discussing race brings up feelings of anxiety, so the classroom must function on a basis of mutual respect. Students in the classroom must realize that each person may be at different levels of understanding. Tatum (1992) and many other researchers argue for a foundational understanding of positionality by using racial identity models to level the playing field of understanding and to allow students to be able to get a conceptual framework of where others might be at in their racial identity development. The possibility for "positive intergroup attitudes, and development of pride in heritage" (Morelli & Spencer, 2000, p. 167) must be encouraged within what Holley and Steiner (2005) call a *safe space* in order to allow students "to grow and learn [and] confront issues that make them uncomfortable" (p. 50).

The physical creation of a safe space for anti-racist education. While the classroom itself needs to be a psychologically safe-space, the physical configuration of a room also matters. Tatum (1992) and Holley and Steiner (2005) conclude that a circular arrangement of desks as opposed to row-style seating was the most conducive to the creation of a safe-space. Students in Holley and Steiner's research note that a larger, un-cramped room is preferable and even state that the temperature of the room matters.

When it comes to class projects and assignments, Middlebrook (2010) notes that, given the choice, many students are curious to see how the other side thinks. Tatum (1992) argues for "opportunities for self-generated knowledge on the part of students" as "a powerful tool for reducing the initial stage of denial that many students experience" (p. 18). In a particular project

where students could choose to go alone to two grocery stores in demographically different areas

or join with a partner of a different race to shop for an apartment, Tatum (1992) has "found that

those Black students who choose this assignment rather than [the former]… are typically eager to

have their White classmates experience the reality of racism" (p. 19). Even the initial creation of

a class that provides "a forum where this discussion [of race and racism] can take place safely

over a semester … may be among the most proactive learning opportunities an institution can

provide" (Tatum, 1992, p. 23). Lawrence (1997) agrees with this idea but believes that it needs to

extend beyond one semester for the most impact and growth to occur.

Battling institutionally racist ideas. Along with the need for students and teachers to

engage in the classroom, there exist institutional barriers that warrant attention. Morelli and

Spencer (2000) hold that certain teachings ignore the inherent structures within our society that

support racism. Building off of McIntosh's (1988) writing on White privilege, Olsson (1997) and

Leonardo (2004) go beyond unnoticed personal gains of being White and expand upon common

ideologies of Whites and racist structures of our society. Many Whites use excuses that

perpetuate White dominance and racism that hide in commonly articulated phrases such as

saying "I'm colorblind" (Olsson, 1997, p. 6), that people need to simply "pull up… on their

bootstraps" (p. 6), or by taking the stance that they are the good white person and in doing so

"distance… [themselves] from '*other*' white people" (p. 16, emphasis added).

Teaching ARE Over MCE

In Morelli and Spencer's (2000) critique of Multi-Cultural Education (MCE), they argue

that while "MCE has a dual purpose of addressing racism and the educational achievement

inequities of minorities" (p. 167) it fails "to address the structural inequities that support racism"

(p. 168). Anti-Racist Education (ARE) aims to produce change, or to "at least enable…[White

people] to be less racist" (p. 168). Being anti-racist is not a simple game of wanting to stop acting like a racist and enlisting the help of friends who are not White. The difference between MCE and ARE becomes clear at times when people believe that they are doing the right thing, but are still firmly entrenched in the structures that maintain the roles of oppressor and oppressed.

Articles on anti-racist behaviors emphasize repeatedly that it is not the responsibility of people of color to teach White people the right way to be anti-racist. This assumes that people of color a) have the energy and b) have the desire to educate White people on this topic. This is why Olsson (1997) argues that White people should build trust amongst other White anti-racists and seek help from them before going to a person of color. Smith and Redington (2010) believe in the ethical necessity for white people to educate themselves and other white people. This may result "in feelings of guilt, helplessness, and moral compromise" and many Whites "fear upending the only social networks they have ever known" because of those friends' racially ignorant thinking (Smith & Redington, 2010, p. 547).

White anti-racist role models. Inherently missing in ARE, as mentioned previously, are White anti-racist role models. Examples of White racists are readily available, as is the notion that membership in the KKK is unacceptable, but concrete examples of how to enact an anti-racist life are limited (Smith & Redington, 2010). The fact that there are articles (as mentioned in Applebaum & Stoik, 2000) that describe the impossibility of Whites to be non-racist signal the barriers and complexities that accompany finding role models and setting achievable action-based plans towards anti-racism. Olsson (1997) acknowledges the prevalent "detours and traps" into which well-intentioned White people often fall (p. 1).

As cited in Smith and Reddington (2010), O'Brien's well-rounded definition of anti-racist as those "persons who have committed themselves, in thought, action, and practice, to dismantling racism" (p. 541) ignores the reality that White anti-racists can become exhausted by this work. Case (2012) also mentions one largely undiscussed aspect of being an active anti-racist: "The majority of women [participating in Case's study] described silence as avoidance of disapproval or ostracism such as being labeled 'the bitch', being made fun of or taunted, or 'getting shut out' of social circles'" (p. 88). Olsson (1997), McIntosh (1988), and Case (2012) all speak to idea that White people have the privilege to take a break, or find themselves in the company of others who look like them and who will not challenge them. Each of these authors, however, state the impetus to finding support in like-minded White anti-racists in order to empower each other and give and receive the strength to continue this undeniably exhausting work.

Addressing guilt. Thompson (2003) describes a story in which she housesits for two friends of hers who subsequently forget to leave her the key she needs to most effectively housesit for them. In this analogical story, she equates the guilt that her friends feel, yet the inaction they choose, as (distantly) paralleling the guilt White people feel towards their friends of color. With the daily phone calls Thompson receives from her friends professing how guilty they feel for not leaving the key, she humorously states, "people of color are not really interested in daily [guilt-ridden] phone calls about how bad we feel. They just want us to send the key" (p. 16). Tatum (1992) also addresses the guilt that accompanies this type of work. She writes that in order to have a successful classroom environment, we must acknowledge that guilt, embarrassment, anger, and frustration are common experiences in moving towards an anti-racist atmosphere.

Implications for the Field

White Identity: To Develop, or NOT to develop

Thompson (2003) calls for a "fully committed form of antiracism" that seems to require White people to do identity development of their own. Because theorists acknowledge that guilt is a natural component of White identity development, White people must move successfully and thoroughly out of that guilt in order to be proactive against racism. Thompson argues that this guilt is not simply combatted by making Whites feel good about their White identity, but rather necessitates a move into a new identity development stage that perhaps is best defined by Helms (1992). Helms's book that discusses her White identity development model calls for autonomy in which White people "no longer rely on people of color to define Whiteness for them" (p. 87). Thompson problematizes this shift and says that White people will then rely on White development theory itself to keep them heading in the right direction. Thompson believes that this reliance on the theory keeps Whiteness at the center.

White people, according to Helms (1992), are authentically recognizing that they can grow as a person by having diverse individuals around them, they are deceiving themselves into believing that they are a "good" White person simply because they feel good about their Whiteness, which is built into that theory. This myth of the good White person lives on, not because no White person can ever be good, but because a "good" White person is deemed "good" because of one's White morals, White ways of knowing, and White centric values. It is inherently impossible to decenter Whiteness while nurturing White identity development, but can one decenter Whiteness while pursuing anti-racist actions? As subjects in Case's (2012) study maintain, admitting one's own racism is a prerequisite to becoming an anti-racist; simply being better than other Whites, or "not *that* kind of white" (Thompson, p. 7), are no longer acceptable

forms of anti-racism. We need to head towards a proactive and tangible ally-ship geared towards "changing what is" (Thompson p. 20).

This leads to the confusing question of White identity development's necessity and usefulness for White students in and out of the classroom. As Wise (2011) asserts, White people generally do not have to think about their being White in the way that people of color are constantly reminded of their "otherness." Thus, the racial identity development, or at least the racial awareness that persons of color may go through, is underdeveloped, if at all even initiated. Perhaps if the first stage is unawareness, then most White people are certainly in this stage. This is why White identity development necessitates itself, not because of its outcomes of White people believing that they are good Whites, but because it is a learning opportunity absent from the dominant culture. If students are not learning about their racial identity in the classroom, then where are they learning it?

The common realization that Whiteness holds a negative connotation for both Whites and people of color complicates the quest to decenter Whiteness from anti-racist work. To be able to launch into genuine multicultural relationships, projects, and awareness, the research does suggest that a positive, or at least a wholly aware, view of one's Whiteness needs to be present. The problem then lies in the concept of being an ally, as raised by many researchers. What does it take to be an ally? Can people of color find allies in White people?

In Thompson's (2003) research, she mentions a scenario in which the exploration of one's White identity led the woman to further embed herself in a place of privilege. She did not want to give up any of her White ways of knowing and succeeding. Another student in the class comments on the threat of this situation: "With allies like that, who needs enemies?" (p. 16). This raises the question upon which Smith and Redington (2010) extrapolate: because White

anti-racist role models are missing, so, too, are directions on how to lead, live, and teach about an anti-racist life. White people will not see the need for change simply because their Black friends tell them that their dominant ways perpetuate racism. Wise (2002) comments that White people feel "much more comfortable listening to one of our own describe the reality of others" and also notes that there are few books on a White student's reading list that encourage "whites to think about what it means to be a member of the dominant racial group" (pp. 226-227). In a time when researchers repeatedly highlight that White people have negative views of their racial identity, that White people do not have enough strong anti-racist role models, and cannot even name such role models that do exist, how can any White person truly call themselves an ally? (Wise, 2002, 2010; Smith & Redington, 2010; Case, 2012).

Participants in Case's (2012) study address these aforementioned points when a number of them agree that this fight needs to be an action-based one and that White people need to use their privilege for good, namely to get other White people to listen (a point also raised by Wise, 2010). Another problem lies in the lack of distinction, or arbitrary use of "multicultural education" to mean "anti-racist education," which, as Morelli and Spencer (2000) discuss, are two separate concepts. The former fails to "address the structural inequities that support racism" whereas the latter's "major goal is to end racism in individuals and institutions" and to actually confront problems in inequality and prejudices (p. 168). This show us ARE's inherent orientation toward action.

A type of White identity model that could prove more useful in the classroom would be one that incorporates a call-to-action, or some stage in which one solidifies one's goals and makes an action plan for their life as an anti-racist. Unfortunately, that has not been included in other identity development models because there has not yet been a need for people of color to

do the same type of identity work that Whites need. People of color live in a world in which they are negotiating their identities every day, whereas a White person could go through most of their life never having to think about the privilege that their race carries. This means these models need to move towards a less stagnant model and towards more action-based ones.

As for those of us who are teaching in the realm of higher education, whether in leadership classes or in a race relations program of study, the onus is placed on the professors to empower change agents (Tatum, 1992). We must not place the pressure on students of color to teach the White students in the class. We need to enable White students to do identity development work outside of the classroom in order to understand their how those identities show up in everyday life. Because the positive view of one's White identity is largely missing, we must incorporate this work into the classroom.

References

Applebaum, B., & Stoik, E. (2000). On the meaning and necessity of a White, anti-racist

      identity. *Philosophy of Education Archive*, 307-316.

Case, K. A. (2012). Discovering the privilege of whiteness: White women's reflections on anti-

      racist identity and ally behavior. *Journal of Social Issues*, *68*(1), 78-96.

Helms, J. (1992). *A race is a nice thing to have: A guide to being a white person or*

      understanding the white persons in your life. Topeka, KS: Content Communications.

Lawrence, S. M. (1997). Beyond race awareness: White racial identity and multicultural

      teaching. *Journal of Teacher Education*, *48*(2), 108-17.

Leonardo, Z. (2004). The color of supremacy: Beyond the discourse of 'white

      privilege'. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, *36*(2), 137-152.

McIntosh, P. (1988). White privilege: Unpacking the invisible knapsack. *Race, class, and gender*

      in the United States: An integrated study, (pp. 165-169) New York, NY: Worth

      Publishers.

Middlebrook, J. A. (2010). The ballot box and beyond: The (im)possibilities of White antiracist

      organizing. *American Quarterly* 62(2), 233-252.

Morelli, P. T. T., & Spencer, M. S. (2000). Use and support of multicultural and antiracist

      education: Research-informed interdisciplinary social work practice. *Social work*, *45*(2),

      166-175.

Olsson, J. (1997). Detour spotting for white anti-racists: A tool for change. Retrieved from

      http://www.culturalbridgestojustice.org/resources/written/detour

Smith, L., & Redington, R. M. (2010). Lessons from the experiences of White antiracist

      activists. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, *41*(6), 541.

Tatum, B. D. (1992). Talking about race, learning about racism: The application of racial identity

      development theory in the classroom. *Harvard Educational Review*, *62*(1), 1-25.

Thompson, A. (2003). Tiffany, friend of people of color: White investments in

      antiracism. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, *16*(1), 7-29.

Wise, T. (2002). White like me: Race and identity through majority eyes. In B. Singley (Ed.),

      When race becomes real: Black and White writers confront their personal histories (225-

      240). Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books.

Wise, T. (2011). *White like me: Reflections on race from a privileged son*. Berkeley, CA: Soft

      Skull Press.