Messages in Collusion: Resident Assistants and White Racial Identity Development

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† Deceased 31 October 2013. This article is dedicated to Kathy Cook. UVM and The Vermont Connection (HESA) miss you.

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THIS CRITICAL CASE STUDY examined the racial identity development of 10 White RAs who participated in 12 hours of diversity and social justice training during a two-week summer program. Helm's White Racial Identity Development Model served as the study's theoretical framework. In this paper, we discuss the incongruence between the Northeast State University Department of Residential Life training content and the RAs' deeply held beliefs about race and racism. We conclude by offering recommendations to residential life practitioner-educators for enhancing RA training, diversity, and social justice education, and assisting White RAs in their racial identity development.

Within higher education and student affairs, educators often espouse the idea of ending racism and striving toward social justice. More specifically, within the functional area of residential life, many institutions articulate the goal of creating socially just residential communities that embrace and celebrate the diversity of all members regardless of race. To attain this goal and create inclusive living communities on college campuses, residential life staff must commit themselves to learning about the deeply complex, insidious nature of racism. The role of the resident assistant (RA) in developing a socially just community is paramount. However, if RAs cannot accept or understand the existence of racism, how can they positively influence their communities' development toward a socially just environment that truly accepts and celebrates all students? In this critical case study, we specifically examine the White racial identity development of 10 RAs and their perceptions of race and racism.

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WHITE RACIAL IDENTITY, WHITE PRIVILEGE, AND CONTEMPORARY RACISM

The literature on White racial identity development provides a theoretical construct for understanding how White people navigate a racialized society (Hardiman, 1982; Helms, 1984, 1990, 1995; Ponterotto, 1988). However, it is important to note that no one model fully explains the developmental process White people undergo to conceptualize and internalize their individual and group-level racial

identities. Thus, in this particular inquiry, we reviewed White racial identity development models, and the literature on White privilege and contemporary racism.

Hardiman (1982) first proposed a developmental model focused on White identity as a "process by which White Americans develop a sense of racial identity as members of a racially privileged group in a society that has at its foundation, White racism" (p. 1). Hardiman (1982) argued that White people exist for much of their lives unconscious of their Whiteness, and therefore unconscious of the societal implications of identifying as White. Hardiman's five-stage model that described the development of racial consciousness among White people was one of the first to conceptualize a possible progression for White people from unconsciously White/tacitly racist to consciously White/actively non-racist. Helms' (1984) model moved the focus away from counseling client's cultural differences/deficiencies, toward a focus on the counselor's racial consciousness. Helm's (1990, 1995) White Racial Identity Development (WRID) model explicates two developmental processes: the abandonment of racism and the development of a non-racist White identity. Grounded in a Black-White dichotomous framework, Helms' model was the first to examine how White people develop attitudes about the racial group to which they belong. Her model explains how White people develop consciousness about identifying as White in juxtaposition to their consciousness and perceptions of Black people.

Partially in response to criticisms of Helms' model that employed a Black-White dichotomy, Ponterotto (1988) proposed a stage model of racial consciousness in which White counselor trainees came to acknowledge and accept not only their own racial identity, but also those of People of Color. Ponterotto's model expanded the scope of racial consciousness development from a White/Black dichotomy to a White/Non-White dichotomy. This model acknowledged that White people's racial consciousness is grounded in their perceptions of themselves in relation to People of Color. Using a four-stage model, one of the major contributions of Ponteretto's model is the recognition that White people cannot develop significant racial consciousness in all White environments.

The concept of White privilege, introduced by McIntosh (1992), is an important aspect of understanding White racial identity development. McIntosh (1992) was the first to explore specific aspects of the benefits one yields from identifying as White in the United States and defined White privilege as:

> an invisible package of unearned assets which I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was "meant" to remain oblivious. White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools, and blank checks. (p. 71)

There is considerable agreement about the essential elements that exist in the social construct of White privilege (Jensen, 2008; Sullivan, 2006; Wildman & Davis, 2008; Wise, 2008c). There are five essential elements of White privilege. First, it is a system of advantages and benefits that keeps power (economic, social, and political) in the possession of White people (McIntosh, 1992). Second, White privilege is invisible and is designed for the beholder to remain oblivious to its existence (Sullivan, 2006). Third, White privilege is deeply en-

grained into the psyche of White people and there is no way for it to not develop (Sullivan, 2006). Fourth, White privilege cannot be given back. It is not something White people can consciously choose to avoid or give up (Wise, 2008c). Finally, privilege for one group can only exist if there is a group that is correspondingly disadvantaged, such as People of Color (Wildman & Davis, 2008; Wise, 2008c).

Contemporary racism looks different than the racism of the Jim Crow Era when it was overt, socially encouraged, accepted, and was directed specifically at individual People of Color (Forman, 2004). Contemporary racism is covert, subtle, and largely directed at maintaining social inequalities based on race. It indicates that White people in the United States believe race does not matter, and does not play an important role in determining either their successes as White people or the failure and hardships of People of Color (Bonilla-Silva, 2010). Colorblindness is the "ideology that race is not a factor in how people are perceived by others" (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015, p. 89); whereas, people of color do not claim race is inconsequential to their experience (Bush, 2004). This denial of race allows White people to continue to ignore their Whiteness, and the privileges that come with identifying as White, but also the role race plays in the daily lives of People of Color. This study grew out of a need to understand how White RAs made meaning of their racial identity based on their participation in a diversity and social justice training.

METHODS

This critical qualitative study employed a single-site case study approach (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014). Case study methodology was chosen because it allows for the "intense focus on a *bounded system*, which can be an individual, a specific program, a process, an institution, or a relationship" (Jones et al., 2014, p. 93-94). In addition, this approach is particularly appropriate because it focuses on the context as an integral part of a particular case or bounded system (Patton, 2015).

The bounded system in this study is the Northeast State University (NSU) Department of Residential Life's RA Diversity and Social Justice Training. The following questions guided the study: 1) What beliefs do White RAs have in regard to the presence or absence of racism on their campus?; and 2) Does the training curriculum affect their attitudes toward creating socially just living communities?

CASE STUDY METHODS

The participants' perspectives, the specifics of the training content, and the training context encapsulate a case that can yield lessons for the department, student affairs, and White racial identity development in contemporary college students. This type of case study is an *instrumental case study*, meaning the case focus is on understanding an overall issue more so than it is about the specific case (Jones et al., 2014).

CONTEXT

Northeast State University (NSU) is a small, public land-grant institution located in the northeastern United States. At the time of the study, total enrollment (undergraduate, graduate, and professional) was approximately 13,500 students. Ninety-two percent of the students enrolled identified as White. The NSU Department of Residential Life employed 131 RAs and was one of the most diverse campus units. Ninety-six (96) of the RAs identified as

White, and 35 identified as a Person of Color.

We employed criterion sampling (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016) to identify prospective participants. All participants had to identify as White, and were new or returning RAs who completed the department's two-week training. Ten RAs (three males and seven females) consented to participate in the study. Eight participants identified as first-year RAs, and two identified as second-year RAs. Since each participant was employed during data collection, to protect their anonymity, the only demographic data collected was their gender and years of experience. Please see Table 1 for participant data.

RA TRAINING PROGRAM

The NSU Department of Residential Life RA Training is a two-week training program. Included in the training curriculum are three, four-hour diversity and social justice sessions for RAs. These sessions provide foundational language and concepts of diversity and social justice that allow staff to engage in conversations on privilege and power. Two sessions focus on identities (i.e., race, gender, sexual orientation, class, etc.). For the third session, the RAs are separated into racial affinity groups to learn more about racial identity development and racism.

Affinity groups originated out of the anarchist and workers movements created in the late 19th century to fight fascism in Spain during the Spanish Civil War (Starhawk, 2008). Use of affinity groups has evolved into a common format in diversity education to explore identity issues in depth, particularly around race (Denevi & Pastan, 2006). Racial affinity groups have been used at NSU for several years to provide an opportunity for dominant and subordinated group members to explore issues specific to their respective identities.

The White RA affinity group's goals were to provide an opportunity for exploration of a positive White identity and community, to connect with other White people in authentic discus-

Table 1

Resident Assistant Demographics

Pseudonym	Gender Identity	New/Returning RA Status
Carrie	Female	New
Barbie	Female	New
Darcy	Female	New
Joy	Female	New
Shelley	Female	New
Tammy	Female	New
Liz	Female	Returning
Liam	Male	New
Jack	Male	New
Chad	Male	Returning

sion of White culture, and to practice interrupting and dismantling oppression. An additional goal of the White affinity group was for the RAs to learn "at the expense" of other White people, not at the expense of People of Color, and to support their racial identity development.

DATA COLLECTION & ANALYSIS

Data collection occurred via face-to-face one hour semi-structured interviews with each participant, and were recorded with a digital voice recorder (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016). An example of the interview questions included: "How would you describe the influence the diversity and social justice training has had on you?

Data analysis focused specifically on the context and setting of this particular case (the RA training program). Interview transcripts were transcribed verbatim and coded. We engaged in the constant comparative method of data analysis (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016). Merriam and Tisdale (2016) articulated the appropriateness of engaging in the constant comparative method for case study data analysis. Our coding techniques resulted in the emergence of three prominent themes: "Exposed," "Incongruent Messages," and "The Department's Agenda." In this paper, we focus specifically on the "Incongruent Messages" because the incongruence between what the RAs were taught growing up and the training messages caused them a great deal of angst and confusion. This was critical to the their White racial identity development and promoting the social justice goals of the department.

TRUSTWORTHINESS

We developed trustworthiness through multiple methods, including triangulation, peer debriefing, and member checking (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016). Triangulation, the process of using multiple data collection methods to substantiate and corroborate data trustworthiness, included collecting data via the semi-structured interviews and reviewing the training program's goals. To further strengthen the data's trustworthiness, a student affairs practitioner-educator with expertise in residential life and racial identity development peer debriefed (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016) the findings. Peer debriefing challenged our analysis and assumptions in a way that led to stronger findings and implications. Finally, the interviews were member checked (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016). We forwarded the transcripts and findings to each participant for their review to ensure we had accurately transcribed their responses.

FINDINGS

As the themes emerged, it became clear there were incongruent messages between what the training content and format conveyed to RAs about diversity and social justice, and the messages the RAs received growing up. Throughout the training, there were four messages the RAs believed were presented, either explicitly through content or implicitly through format: 1) segregation is necessary; 2) White people need to learn from other White people; 3) being "colorblind" is bad; and 4) racism continues to exist. These messages fundamentally contradicted earlier messages the RAs believed to be true about diversity and social justice: 1) segregation is bad; 2) White people can only learn about diversity from People of Color; 3) it is good to be "colorblind;" and 4) racism no longer exists (or at minimum "things" are better for People of Color. We combine the messages the participants believe were pre-

sented during RA training with the contradictory messages they received growing up to illuminate how the messages "collided."

Message 1: Segregation vs. Inclusion

No component of the training received as much feedback as the affinity groups. Among the terms the RAs used to describe their emotions during the training included: discouraged, skeptical, intense, unsettling, upsetting, denial, discomfort, conflicted, dread, confusion, angry, frustrated, and shocked. They experienced many of these emotions simultaneously. The RAs were "shocked:" when asked to divide by racial identities for affinity groups. Liam's initial panicked thought was, "Is this a test?" The RAs' shock originated from the belief that dividing into racial groups was the same as segregation. They associated segregation with Jim Crow Era racism and deeply believed it was wrong. Carrie described her uneasiness, "It didn't feel right. It felt like we were going back in time. Like we were going back to the segregated schools, and like, 'Oh you're White, so you sit here.'" One reason the RAs were shocked by the affinity groups was because most of them had never been asked to separate by race.

The division by racial identify felt counterintuitive to the RAs and antithetical to their perceptions about diversity training. The RAs believed the goals of diversity and social justice were to unify races and increase cultural communication. However, they felt the training's format undermined these objectives by creating unnecessary barriers. Despite the amount of time presenters dedicated to explaining the purpose of affinity groups to the RAs, the findings indicate many of them did not understand the significance or the effectiveness of this format. Their feedback suggests many of the RAs believe affinity groups are the wrong approach for teaching diversity and social justice.

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Message 2: White People need to Learn from Other White People vs. White People Can Only Learn from People of Color

Much of the confusion around the affinity groups stemmed from the belief that White people cannot learn about diversity and social justice from other White people. They did not understand how participating in racially delineated groups promoted diversity and social justice. This incomprehension revealed an underlying assumption: to learn about diversity and social justice, White people need to learn about it from People of Color. Barbie stated, "I know it's horrible to put people on the spot and say, 'You're a minority (sic). Tell us what it's like for you.' But something more to that effect would have been more valuable."

The RAs believed they needed People of Color to teach them about diversity and social justice because they equated learning *about diversity* with learning *about People of Color*. The idea that White people can only learn about diversity and social justice from People of Color was reinforced by instances where the RAs *did*

learn new information by listening to People of Color. Tammy described an epiphany during a staff meeting:

> There were People of Color on my staff sharing stories and that's when it hit me! I realized that my experience is nothing like some of these people that I had to work with. That was interesting and hard and helpful all at the same time.

Several RAs remarked that it was difficult to talk in small groups, that conversations took a long time to establish and were maintained at superficial levels, and that no real depth in dialogue was achieved. As a Senior RA, Chad participated in two all-White affinity groups and did not find the all-White composition contributed to a greater degree of comfort either time:

> As far as being effective, I don't think it is. People still aren't being … they're not being open. They're not being honest. They're all just still trying to say the right thing. I think that people, even after being separated, at least in my group, and both times I've done it were still, if not as inhibited then, almost as inhibited as if everyone was there.

The affinity group format designed to allow White RAs the space and place to explore their identities together, instead challenged their concept that diversity and social justice can only be learned from People of Color.

Message 3: Colorblind is Wrong vs. Colorblind is the Goal

One of the most direct clashes between messages centered on the concept of colorblindness or denying that people "see" race. The following messages were clearly articulated to the RAs during the training program: being colorblind perpetuates dominant/subordinate racial dynamics, and it is hurtful to People of Color for White people to deny racial differences.

Several participants admitted receiving divergent messages about colorblindness growing up. They were raised to believe they should ignore racial differences and that to acknowledge race was hurtful to People of Color. They were taught to believe colorblindness is a demonstration that one is *not* racist and that noticing racial differences equates to being racist. Carrie surmised, "I've been told [growing up] you're racist if you notice differences." Shelley shared a similar sentiment, "I'm from [suburbia], a very middle-class, very White community. I've always been taught that colorblindness is how you should … that's just how I was raised. However, even after participating in the training program, Shelley maintained that colorblindness is a better way:

> I know the whole idea of minimizing might be a contributing factor; but I almost feel like it's where you want to be. Because I know we were told that it's bad to say "but we're all people." But we are, and we're all trying to work together – we're all one staff.

Tammy offered the following, "I don't want to say I don't notice that people are different, because they are. I'm not going to say that I'm colorblind, or whatever people say. But, it [a person's racial identity] doesn't make me treat any body any differently."

Despite participating in the diversity and social justice training, the RAs continued to express that colorblindness is appropriate. They believed it was safer to ignore racial differences than to acknowledge them.

Message 4: Racism Continues to Exist vs. Things are Better for People of Color

The RAs strongly believed that contemporary

race relations in the United States were better for People of Color than they have been historically, with many of the RAs referencing colonization, slavery, segregation, and the Civil Rights Era. Past malfeasances were offered as evidence that times have changed, and the inability to offer contemporary examples provided the RAs justification that socio-political conditions had improved for People of Color. Chad acknowledged:

> I never realized that race really was a potent factor in American interactions today. Generally, since Civil Rights, things have gotten better. There are still all these little things that you just say to yourself that it's better.

Another factor contributing to the RAs beliefs that race relations are better is that most of them did not recognize racism. All of them acknowledged racism exists but they could not provide contemporary examples, beyond having heard a racist joke or having seen racist graffiti. Carrie commented, "I'm sure there probably is [racism]. I don't see it ... I don't see racism. Maybe I just don't know what racism exactly is." Liam concurred, "In my experience, I've never seen any racism, which is good. But I'm sure it's out there somewhere." Jack shared the following, "I believe it does exist, but I don't think it's like an outright...like it's not...people aren't going around in white robes and burning crosses and stuff." Most of the RAs admitted that some racism still existed, but they also acknowledged being unable to recognize it in their daily lives.

DISCUSSION & IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study examined White RAs' experiences through one diversity and social justice training. The RAs struggled particularly with the ways in which the content challenged their beliefs, and the emotional influence of the experience. Because of deeply entrenched racial constructs and White privilege, the RAs failed to recognize the influence of race, the realities of their Whiteness, and the ways in which they unconsciously and unintentionally contribute to and perpetuate racism.

The incongruence between the RAs' beliefs and the messages of the diversity and social justice content and format has implications for RA training. What seemed to be missing for the RAs during summer training was the connection between the training content and how it applied to them specifically, what it had to do with diversity and social justice, and how it applied to their role as RAs.

The RAs greatly benefitted from their White privilege. It permitted them to comfortably remain in the early stages of WRID, and allowed them to retreat into comfort, if discomfort emerged while engaged in diversity and social justice training. White privilege perpetuated the RAs' beliefs that they obtained all there is to learn about diversity and social justice during the 12-hour training, and that it could have been learned in half the time. Their White privilege allowed them to completely "miss the point" of the training curriculum while believing they received everything out of it and more.

The findings also support that the White RAs are tightly bound to a colorblind ideology; particularly their lack of interest in race, their unawareness of racism, their beliefs that contemporary societal conditions are better for People of Color, and their belief that no inter-

ventions are necessary for People of Color.

Finally, the findings indicate there were unintended consequences of the training program. Stone (2002) referred to these "unintended consequences" as the "harmful side effects of well-intentioned policy" (p. 192). The three unintended consequences of this training included: 1) RAs retreated into Whiteness as the result of inadequate time to process the emotionally charged emersion into awareness; 2) RAs developed strategies for remaining in *Reintegration* long-term; and 3) RAs misunderstand how People of Color feel about race, which contributes to a deeper retreat into colorblindness.

The analysis of this study yields two primary recommendations. First, residential life programs must be explicit in how diversity and social justice training connects and applies to the RA role and to White RAs racial identity development. For programs that engage in affinity group work, it is important to articulate why affinity groups are critical to the learning process. Second, more time should be allotted for the participants to fully engage and make connections between the training content and format, and the training goals, such as a semester-long course to fully explore diversity and social justice issues within a societal context.

In addition to the recommendations for residential life programs, student life practitioner-educators should consider how White students' racial identity development contribute to how White students engage with Students of Color on their respective campuses. This could have implications for other student life initiatives and for practitioner-educators' efforts to advance White students' racial identity development to a non-racist identity.

There are multiple opportunities to extend this research. We conducted the study within a single department of residential life on one campus. Our study provided a deeper understanding of White RAs' racial identity development, and their adherence to a colorblind ideology; therefore, future research might extend this work beyond one department of residential life program in the Northeast United States. In addition, the recruitment/sampling methods may have caused sample bias (Patton, 2015). There is the possibility the RAs who volunteered to participate in this study were more open to diversity and social justice topics than RAs who did not volunteer to participate.

CONCLUSION

Participating in diversity and social justice training was a difficult and uncomfortable process for the White RAs. Prior research (Hardiman, 1982; Helms, 1990. 1995; Ponterotto, 1988) indicates there is no way to raise White people's racial consciousness without discomfort and resistance. Given this, examining race and racism is often an uncomfortable and difficult process for White people (Kivel, 2002; Wise, 2008). White RAs must admit their racism to learn to be non-racists (Helms, 1992). To achieve this, the RAs must acknowledge and address the incongruent messages they have received. Such messages potentially keep White RAs deeply entrenched in subtle forms of racism that are carefully disguised as attempts to be non-racist. The messages they have received throughout their lives are potentially the greatest barriers to their learning. These messages will take time and effort on their part to change, challenge, and unlearn.

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Discussion Questions

1. The authors posit: "There is no way to raise White people's racial consciousness without discomfort and resistance." How do you create spaces and opportunities for discomfort resulting in learning and reflection? How do you support students in that process?
2. RAs in the case study experienced dissonance between messages in training and messages from their upbringing. How can you challenge and support students experiencing cognitive dissonance?
3. White identity development is a process that takes much longer than two-week RA training. How can housing staff continue to work with RAs in their development throughout the year?

Discussion questions developed by Jordan Peterson, graduate student, Clemson University