

The Challenges of Becoming a White Ally

The Counseling Psychologist

2017, Vol. 45(5) 706–716

© The Author(s) 2017

Reprints and permissions:

sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/0011000017719323

journals.sagepub.com/home/tcp



Derald Wing Sue¹

Abstract

The four articles in this Major Contribution represent a major step toward defining, identifying, discussing, and analyzing the many internal and external challenges faced by White individuals on their journeys to developing nonracist and antiracist identities. I attempt to extract important White ally themes from the contributions, indicate areas of concern, stress that being nonracist is not enough, and point to an important area of preparation that would aid White individuals in becoming allies in the struggle for equal rights.

Keywords

multiculturalism, social justice, race, ethnicity

I sometimes visualize the ongoing cycle of racism as a moving walkway at the airport. Active racist behavior is equivalent to walking fast on the conveyor belt. The person engaged in active racist behavior has identified with the ideology of White supremacy and is moving with it. Passive racist behavior is equivalent to standing still on the walkway. No overt effort is being made, but the conveyor belt moves the bystanders along to the same destination as those who are actively walking. Some of the bystanders may feel the motion of the conveyor belt, see the active racists ahead of them, and choose to turn around, unwilling to go to the same destination as the White supremacists. But unless they are walking actively in the opposite direction at a speed faster than the

¹Columbia University, New York, NY, USA

Corresponding Author:

Derald Wing Sue, Department of Counseling and Clinical Psychology, Teachers College, Columbia University, Box 36, 525 W. 120th Street, New York, NY 10027, USA.

Email: dw2020@columbia.edu

conveyor belt—unless they are actively antiracist—they will find themselves carried along with the others. (Tatum, 1997, pp. 11–12)

The four articles comprising the Major Contribution (Atkins, Fitzpatrick, Poolokasingham, Lebeau, & Spanierman, 2017 [this issue]; Smith, Kashubeck-West, Payton, & Adams, 2017 [this issue]; Spanierman, Poteat, Whittaker, Schlosser, & Arévalo Avalos, 2017 [this issue]; Spanierman & Smith, 2017 [this issue]) are insightful, informative, and revealing. The authors engender hope and optimism, but at the same time point to the herculean struggle of convincing White Americans to become *true* allies to people of color. In reading the articles, Tatum's (1997) powerful metaphor immediately came to mind. First, the conveyor belt analogy is symbolic of biased institutional policies, practices, and structures that control the everyday lives of people. These are omnipresent, hidden from consciousness, and insidiously move people toward notions of White supremacy, normalizing racist attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. Because of socialization practices and cultural conditioning, the movement is barely noticed by most White people because Whiteness is a default standard (Bell, 2004; Sue, 2015). It lulls them to sleep, and its invisible nature allows many White people to maintain their innocence and naiveté, while participating in a racially flawed culture.

Second, the pace by which people walk on the conveyor belt, whether they move forward or backward, or whether they choose to stand still, all have implications: (a) *active racists* are those who believe in White supremacy and walk quickly forward; (b) *unintentional racists* are those who stroll slowly, oblivious to the direction in which they are headed; (c) *nonracists* are those who choose not to walk at all; and (d) *antiracists* move in the opposite direction and/or attempt to disrupt the movement of the belt (Sue, 2015). Because the movement of the walkway is continuous and dynamic, both unintentional racists and nonracists are still carried along in a direction that allows racism to thrive. The antiracist, however, moves in the opposite direction, but finds it emotionally and psychological exhausting. These individuals are punished for their societal transgressions and are frequently tempted not to resist, but instead, to go along to get along. In many respects, the conveyor belt metaphor is played out in the themes captured within each of the Major Contribution articles, where each aspect of becoming a White ally has its own unique challenges. These include making people aware of the movement of the belt, overthrowing one's biased cultural conditioning, redefining and understanding one's Whiteness, becoming nonracist, and developing a

commitment to antiracist actions. All of these actions need to take place to stop the movement of the belt and to become a White ally.

In an earlier issue of *The Counseling Psychologist* that questioned whether White psychologists should conduct multicultural research (Mio & Iwamasa, 1993), I expressed disappointment and impatience with the slow pace of building bridges of trust and mutual understanding between White multicultural researchers and their colleagues of color (Sue, 1993). I pointed out how White researchers often possessed the social biases of the society, did not understand themselves as racial and cultural beings, and asked and answered questions about the human condition from a primarily invisible White perspective. I indicated that the work of White researchers often did not contribute to the betterment of communities of color but, at times, was detrimental to their well-being. Several colleagues of color expressed similar sentiments toward White researchers and were equally critical of their work and involvement in multicultural research. For example, Helms (1993) asserted that White racial identity development influences White researchers who are often oblivious to their racial privilege and biases; Parham (1993) suggested the high likelihood of cultural oppression by well-intentioned, but unenlightened, majority group researchers.

Much of my pessimism about the positive role that White researchers may play in the study of race and racism has diminished over the years, and I am heartened by the broadening of the discussion to encompass the notion of White allies in all facets of social justice work beyond research. The articles in this Major Contribution contain the seeds of hope that we are on the doorsteps of identifying the characteristics, experiences, resistances, and actions that are important to becoming a White ally. Furthermore, the authors of the Major Contribution remind the counseling profession of its moral imperative to train and produce enlightened White allies in the realm of multicultural research, training, and practice.

Although I am optimistic that we are making progress, I continue to be disenchanted with the low numbers of *true* White allies encountered in my professional and personal life. This is not to deny that the majority of White Americans (and those in the counseling profession) do not (a) consciously value social justice; (b) consider themselves good, moral, and decent human beings; (c) stand against overt forms of racism (hate crimes); and (d) believe they would actively fight against injustice and unfairness (Dovidio, Gaertner, Kawakami, & Hodson, 2002). Despite this stance, however, White individuals are products of their social conditioning and prisoners of a White worldview that shapes and influences their racial reality (Bell, 2004). Thus, it may be overly harsh to conclude that they are too clueless and unenlightened about race and racism to be *true* White allies.

Important White Ally Themes

I find it interesting that both qualitative studies in this issue (Atkins, Fitzpatrick, Poolokasingham, Lebeau, & Spanierman, 2017; Spanierman, Poteat, Whittaker, Schlosser, & Arévalo Avalos, 2017) utilize a purposive sampling strategy to ensure that participants would be considered White allies by their colleagues of color. I would submit that if similar studies were conducted, whether in the United States or Canada, the same names would probably appear over and over, indicating to me that the pool of White allies, from the perspective of people of color, is truly small. Yet, if we were to directly ask White counseling psychologists whether they would consider themselves allies to people of color, an overwhelming number would answer in the affirmative. Thus, the overarching questions are: How do Whites become true allies to people of color? What experiences and characteristics do White allies have and possess that makes them valuable and authentic collaborators in the struggle for equal rights? The themes that seem to arise from these four articles offer valuable insights and possible answers.

Theme One

Becoming a White ally is a monumental task that presents many internal (personal) and external challenges. It is a constant lifelong journey. Among the many important goals of a White ally, one is to develop trusting and authentic relationships with people of color.

Spanierman and Smith (2017) nicely summarized many of the concerns just mentioned. In their introduction to the Major Contribution, they discuss the historical and ongoing mistrust and suspicion that scholars and practitioners of color hold for White ally collaborators, and suggest common pitfalls that destroy White allies' credibility among groups of color. However, perhaps the most intriguing aspect of their article is the attempt to provide an aspirational definition of *White allies*. If you study the definition itself, you will note it contains six important characteristics: (a) nuanced understanding of institutional racism and White privilege, (b) continual self-reflection of one's own racism, (c) commitment to using racial privilege to promote equity, (d) engagement in actions that interrupt and challenge racism, (e) active participation in coalition building with people of color, and (f) overcoming societal forces that attempt to silence White allies.

The definition of a White ally can be criticized for being too broad and inadequately operationalized, but I find it contains the essential components of cultural competence training (Arredondo et al., 1996), what we know

about White racial identity development (Helms, 1995), the important distinction between nonracist and antiracist actions (Tatum, 1997), and the many challenges to maintaining a White ally orientation (Sue, 2015). Achieving these goals appears overwhelming and, frankly, each may represent necessary but not sufficient conditions to becoming a White ally. For example, to be aware of one's own biases or to be nonracist is important, but does not necessarily translate into social actions (Helms, 1995; Tatum, 1997).

Theme Two

Becoming a White ally means developing an awareness of Whiteness and White privilege, and overcoming the many obstacles that discourage social advocacy and social justice. It can be an exhausting process requiring intestinal fortitude and support from others.

In their study on how White multicultural scholars envision their roles as allies to people of color, Spanierman et al. (2017) identify 10 important domains consistent with Spanierman and Smith's (2017) definition of White allies. Many of the participants identified critical incidents from their experiential background that propelled them towards awareness of social injustice, the role that conflict and discomfort played in their racial awakening, the unpleasant realization of their White privilege and Whiteness, the difficulty of maintaining a commitment to antiracist advocacy, the emotionally depleting nature of the work, and the need for support to continue the journey toward liberation and social action. Based on their findings, the authors' recommend that potential White allies stop associating exclusively with people who are clones of themselves, take risks and make mistakes, and exercise self-care.

Although I concur with Spanierman et al.'s (2017) findings, the study raises many more questions than answers for me. For example, I would surmise that many White professionals have had similar experiences as the 12 White participants in this study. They have been exposed to multicultural experiences both personally and professionally, occasionally felt like outsiders, and have experienced conflict and discomfort when exposed to encounters with racism that challenge their own complicity in perpetuating injustice. Yet, why have they remained unable to move beyond their own ethnocentric conditioning? What makes them cling so tenaciously to their beliefs that racism resides in others, but not in themselves? Is it possible that potential White allies are born and not raised?

Seriously, there must be some other overlooked personal or external experiences and characteristics among this group of White participants that allowed them to overcome their social conditioning. What might they

be? If education and training is important, what nuggets of truth can we extract from this study that would have implications for developing potential White allies? The authors hint at them, but to be fair, do not make them a central focus of their study. Yet, there are important clues here regarding the type of training that would be most effective in teaching our students about White allyship, which I believe are found in the study by Atkins et al. (2017).

Theme Three

White allies are not only nonracist, but also take on an antiracist identity that “walks the talk.” Awareness of one’s own racial identity and the privileges that ensue are not enough without social action. Unfortunately, however, antiracist actions can be uncomfortable, discouraging, and even painful.

In the third article on White professors teaching about racism, Smith, Kashubeck-West, Payton, and Adams (2017) describe the challenges and rewards of teaching graduate courses in multicultural psychology and education. In many respects, the teaching experiences encountered by these authors provide us with a clear understanding about the distinction between a nonracist identity and an antiracist one. I submit that true White allies commit themselves to antiracist actions and that it is not enough to remain passive or even to be nonracist. As Tatum (1997) pointed out, unless one is actively moving in the opposite direction of the conveyor belt or trying to stop it, the walkway will carry even nonracists in the direction of White supremacy. White allies who teach multicultural courses are courageous educators because they “practice what they preach” and put themselves at risk for the strong backlash so aptly described by Smith et al. (2017).

This article is central to our understanding about why so few White scholars are willing to teach a course related to racism and, by extension, symbolizes why taking antiracist actions in other settings is so difficult. Even if motivated and willing to take action, many are ill prepared for the many emotive challenges they are likely to encounter in the classroom (Sue, Torino, Capodilupo, Rivera, & Lin, 2009). Internally, the struggles of White professors teaching about racism or multiculturalism elicit potential pitfalls that are described in the imposter syndrome, multicultural perfectionism, and multicultural projections. Externally, like their colleagues of color, they also encounter resistance from their own White colleagues by negative student evaluations and threats to their social location in the academy and society (Sue et al., 2009). Smith et al. (2017) end their discussion with a list of helpful suggestions for White ally professors such as the need to keep on with the

struggle and, more importantly, the need to model their own flawed human nature, share their own biases, and exemplify antiracist identities and actions for their students. Being authentic and real about who they are as racial and cultural beings supersedes the need to be the all-knowing and liberated, unbiased professor.

Theme Four

The transformation to developing cultural competence and becoming a White ally is more than a cognitive or intellectual exercise. Lived experience and lived reality are crucial elements for the personal development of White allies.

In the final article of the Major Contribution, Atkins et al. (2017), attempt to identify personally transformative experiences of White counselors in their journeys toward cultural competence and becoming White allies. Many of the themes overlap with those presented in the Spanierman et al. (2017) study, in which personal experiences played key roles in participants' racial awakening. Among these experiences were feelings of difference, positive familial influences, professional work with diverse clients who questioned their competencies, dealing with powerful emotions, and conflicts between what they were taught and the realization that it was inapplicable to their work. But, again, I pose the important question: What makes this group of White participants different from other White clinicians who experience similar critical events, but do not transform? Describing a person's racial awakening and awareness is important, but how does it help us explain why some White individuals transform and others do not?

There are, however, important and intriguing findings in this study that have implications for multicultural awareness development and for the education and training of counseling psychologists. One of the important findings is that most participants did not credit coursework with increasing their awareness development. Rather, some described the courses as unhelpful, damaging, perpetuating stereotypes, or being too general in their description of different cultural groups to be of much value. What this may indicate is that, despite attempts to diversify the curriculum, most graduate programs continue to be White and Eurocentric in nature. I would submit that even if the content of courses were truly multicultural in nature, change and transformation are more than an intellectual or cognitive exercise. Indeed, the authors' most important finding, I believe, is that *lived experience* is an important key to cultural competence and White racial awakening. Even their list of strategies for awareness development contain the common thread of "making it personal."

Commitment to Antiracist Actions: Some Closing Thoughts

The body of work and ideas contained in this Major Contribution provides us with the seeds of a broad conceptual understanding in the development of White allies. These include the internal changes that need to occur as allies struggle to understand themselves as White racial and cultural beings, the oftentimes unpleasant emotive nature of their awakening, the facilitative and oppositional forces related to personal transformation, hints at what is needed to maintain a nonracist identity and, finally, the commitment to antiracist actions. In my opinion, it is in this last phase of development that training programs are most deficient. Helms (1995) indicated early on that White identity development (a necessary transformation for potential White allies) involves a two-stage process: the abandonment of White racism (becoming nonracist), and the development of a nonracist identity. The Smith et al. (2017) article on White professors teaching multicultural courses provides us with a direct inside look at not only the antiracist actions of these allies, but also the numerous antagonistic forces that must be overcome.

Although most training programs continue to grapple with self-awareness, I submit that commitment to antiracist actions is either neglected or discussed in highly general, philosophical, and aspirational terms. Admonitions to take action, to speak out when discrimination occurs, to “do the right thing,” to advocate on behalf of people of color, to intervene in systems of power and privilege, and to promote social justice are calls that have moral force and urgency. But we fail to prepare our White brothers and sisters for the alternative roles they will need to play to be effective; we do not provide them with the strategies and skills needed for antiracist interventions; and we do not prepare them to face a hostile and invalidating society that pushes back hard, forcing them to either readopt their former White biased roles or maintain their silence in the face of White supremacist ideology and practice. There appear to be three areas in which we must do better in order to arm White allies with the tools to do their work and to immunize them against pushback forces.

First, we need to expand traditional helping roles to encompass not only those in counseling and clinical realms, but also those in advocacy. We need to train White individuals for systems intervention roles identified by Atkinson, Thompson, and Grant (1993): advocate, change agent, consultant, adviser, teacher, and facilitator of indigenous support systems. Although we do an adequate job of training potential White allies to be good clinicians,

we do not prepare them effectively to become change agents or to understand that our actions are sociopolitical in nature.

Second, we seldom provide potential White allies with the skills and organizational strategies needed to facilitate institutional and societal change. We may prepare them well to engage in attending and influencing skills in clinical settings, but we do not provide them with the opportunities and strategies for systems intervention. As Tatum (1997) pointed out, the largest challenge for antiracists is changing the programs, policies, structures, and practices of organizations that foster White supremacy.

Third, I have become increasingly aware that we do not adequately prepare and immunize our potential White allies for the painful challenges they are likely to encounter as they go forth as social justice advocates. Speaking up when racist jokes are told, making known your displeasure with discrimination in the workplace, objecting to biased school curriculums, confronting others about their microaggressions, and advocating for organizational change are likely to result in negative reactions and consequences. As the authors in this issue indicate, the pushback can be great and with much cost. White allies may be labeled “White liberal” troublemakers, isolated by fellow White colleagues, threatened to be disowned by family members, or risk not obtaining a raise or promotion they had hoped to receive. Doing antiracist work is exhausting unless White allies develop support systems that can nurture and encourage them along the way.

Ironically, as nonracist and antiracist identities are developed, the traditional support groups of family, friends, and colleagues often no longer play supporting roles. In fact, they can serve the opposite function of forcing allies to be silent or to return to their old ways. When antiracist identities are developed, former acquaintances may no longer be clones of the antiracist person! To keep on going on means finding other White allies, forming new friendships and partnerships (especially with persons of color), and locating supportive others for sustenance and nourishment along the social justice journey. How to form these new alliances is in itself a monumental challenge.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

References

- Arredondo, P., Toporek, R., Brown, S. P., Jones, J., Locke, D. C., Sanchez, J., & Stadler, H. (1996). Operationalization of the multicultural counseling competencies. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development, 24*, 42–78. doi:10.1002/j.2161-1912.1996.tb00288.x
- Atkins, S. L., Fitzpatrick, M. R., Poolokasingham, G., Lebeau, M., & Spanierman, L. B. (2017). Make it personal: A qualitative investigation of White counselors' multicultural awareness development. *The Counseling Psychologist, 45*, 669–696. doi:10.1177/0011000017719458
- Atkinson, D. R., Thompson, C. E., & Grant, S. K. (1993). A three-dimensional model for counseling racial/ethnic minorities. *The Counseling Psychologist, 22*, 257–277. doi:10.1177/0011000093212010
- Bell, L. A. (2004). Sincere fictions: The pedagogical challenges of preparing white teachers for multicultural classrooms. *Equity and Excellence in Education, 35*, 236–244. doi:10.1080/713845317
- Dovidio, J. F., Gaertner, S. L., Kawakami, K., & Hodson, G. (2002). Why can't we all just get along? Interpersonal biases and interracial distrust. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology, 8*, 88–102. doi:10.1037/1099-9809.8.2.88
- Helms, J. E. (1993). I also said, "White racial identity influences White researchers." *The Counseling Psychologist, 21*, 240–243. doi:10.1177/0011000093212007
- Helms, J. E. (1995). An update of Helms' White and People of Color racial identity models. In J. G. Ponterotto, J. M. Casas, L. A. Suzuki, & C. M. Alexander (Eds.), *Handbook of multicultural counseling* (pp. 181–198). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Mio, J. S., & Iwamasa, G. (1993). To do or not to do: That is the question for White cross-cultural researchers. *The Counseling Psychologist, 21*, 197–212. doi:10.1177/0011000093212001
- Parham, T. A. (1993). White researchers conducting multicultural research: Can their efforts be "mo betta?" *The Counseling Psychologist, 21*, 250–256. doi:10.1177/0011000093212009
- Smith, L., Kashubeck-West, S., Payton, G., & Adams, E. (2017). White professors teaching about racism: Challenges and rewards. *The Counseling Psychologist, 45*, 651–668. doi:10.1177/0011000017717705
- Spanierman, L. B., Poteat, V. P., Whittaker, V. A., Schlosser, L. Z., & Arévalo Avalos, M. R. (2017). Allies for life? Lessons from White scholars of multicultural psychology. *The Counseling Psychologist, 45*, 618–650. doi:10.1177/0011000017719459
- Spanierman, L. B., & Smith, L. (2017). Roles and responsibilities of White allies: Implications for research, teaching, and practice. *The Counseling Psychologist, 45*, 606–617. doi:10.1177/0011000017717712
- Sue, D. W. (1993). Confronting ourselves: The White and ethnic minority researcher. *The Counseling Psychologist, 21*, 244–249. doi:10.1177/0011000093212008
- Sue, D. W. (2015). *Race talk and the conspiracy of silence*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.
- Sue, D. W., Torino, G. C., Capodilupo, C. M., Rivera, D. P., & Lin, A. I. (2009). How White faculty perceive and react to classroom dialogues on race: Implications

for education and training, *The Counseling Psychologist*, 37, 1090–1115.
doi:10.1177/001100009340443

Tatum, B. D. (1997). *Why are all the black kids sitting together in the cafeteria?* New York, NY: Basic Books.

Author Biography

Derald Wing Sue is professor of psychology and education at Teachers College Columbia University. He is best known for his work on cultural competence, micro-aggressions, and racial dialogues.