

## CONFLUENCES OF STUDENT LEADERSHIP AND WHITE PRIVILEGE: Exploring Consciousness-of-Self with White Student Leaders

### Abstract

There is a growing body of literature signaling the relevance of race in leadership development, but many conventional models do not prompt exploration of this social identity. The omission of race in leadership curriculum is disadvantageous for all college students, but among White student leaders, it may be a continuance of White privilege. The purpose of this constructivist study was to explore how White student leaders make meaning of their racial identity, and corresponding privilege, through a relevant leadership framework. Racial caucusing was employed as a method to prompt discussion and gather narratives from four White student leaders. Findings from this narrative inquiry study indicate how the confluences of race and leadership can advance self-awareness among White student leaders.

### Introduction

Leadership education typically encourages college students to explore themselves to become better leaders (Kouzes & Posner, 2014). Well-known texts of popular models prompt self-examination of influences such as family, faith, and culture (Early & Fincher, 2017). Race is strangely absent from these considerations despite representing a critical component of identity (Ostick & Wall, 2011). In response to this glaring gap, the Association of Leadership Educators signaled the need for additional scholarship on the influence of race (Andenoro et al., 2013). In recent years, there has been a growing amount of research dedicated to leadership development and empowerment for marginalized racial identities (Bordas, 2016; Dugan et al., 2012; Pendakur & Furr, 2016).

More attention must be given to crafting models

relevant to racially marginalized students, but there is also a need to assist White students in developing racial awareness in their leadership identity. Conventional leadership models often omit or ignore race altogether (Ostick & Wall, 2011). These shortcomings are disadvantageous to all college students, but especially White students (Boatright-Horowitz et al., 2013). The omission of race in leadership curriculum is a manifestation of White privilege which needs to be addressed through scholarship.

A leadership framework that encourages reflections on one's own racial identity, or even privilege, may advance their understanding of self and others. White students do not often perceive themselves to have a racial identity (Smith, 2014). Rather, the White identity is often described as being neutral or only relevant when compared to others (Hardiman & Keehn, 2012). Seeing Whiteness as a void, White student leaders may

be missing critical components when forming their leadership identity. By couching concepts of power and privilege in a heavily used leadership model, it can be communicated that effective leaders must acquire a racial awareness.

Scholars have also acknowledged the paradox in researching White privilege; providing special attention to a privileged group who already receives adequate attention (Boatright-Horowitz et al., 2013). Foundational research on students in higher education was historically skewed towards White male participants (Cabrera, 2018). Even the connotations of “leadership” is a loaded term with a strong association with a White male identity (Kodama & Laylo, 2017). While these are convincing arguments to produce leadership models for students of color, it also warrants a reexamination of existing models.

Rather than create another model and give undue attention to privilege, this paradox could be addressed by using an existing leadership model to explore White privilege. The social change model of leadership is the most widely used in college student development (Wagner, 2011). This model contains conceptual prospects for examining White privilege such as the *consciousness-of-self* framework (Early & Cooney, 2017). *Consciousness-of-self* explores individual domains of leadership and has been suggested by scholars to be a predictive factor of developing socially responsible leadership (Dugan et al., 2014).

White students need to understand what it means to be a leader with White privilege. This constructivist study engaged four White student leaders through a racial caucus to make meaning of their White privilege. Through the repurposing of existing leadership concepts, such as *consciousness-of-self*, this study sought to generate new ways to examine racial privilege. As a new take on leadership models, the use of *consciousness-of-self* significantly advances the conversation around inclusive student leadership.

## Review of Literature

Synthesizing literature from areas of leadership education, White privilege, and cocurricular diversity education provides guidance for exploring the confluences of student leaders and White privilege. This review briefly surveys the concepts relevant to the White racial identity. Review of recent research on White college students lead to poignant considerations for the findings of this study. The literature review concludes with an in-depth exploration of the social change model of leadership development. As a tool of merging social identity and leadership development, the *consciousness-of-self* component from the model is provided to explore identity with White student leaders.

**White Racial Identity and Racism.** Term such as *Whiteness, White privilege, and White fragility* help reframe racism beyond hate groups or immoral individuals, instead highlighting the subtle and systematic ways White people are elevated (DiAngelo, 2018). For example, White people may assume everyone has basic rights, resources, and privileges, yet these benefits are often only available to White people (DiAngelo, 2016). As a racial blind spot, this epistemology ignores or reinforces the systematic benefits of being White (Chandler, 2017). A worldview where all are considered equal, but Whites are still favored, is labeled as *Whiteness*. As an un-racialized perspective, *Whiteness* also assumes being White is normal and insignificant to a person’s life (Kendall, 2013).

For several decades, scholars have been examining the unearned benefits associated with being White (Niehuis, 2005). These benefits are labeled as *White privilege* (McIntosh, 1988). Nevertheless, White privilege continues to be challenging to understand and tricky to differentiate from *Whiteness*. If *Whiteness* accounts for the worldview of many White people, White privilege enumerates the specific benefits from this worldview. McIntosh’s work on the “invisible knapsack” is perhaps the most well-

known explanation of White privilege (Niehuis, 2005). With a metaphor of an invisible knapsack laden with privileges only White individuals carry, this seminal work provides a series of scenarios to help illustrate unfair treatment of people of color and exhibit the unseen benefits conferred to White individuals.

The overall dominance of White culture is known as *White supremacy* and encompasses a Whiteness worldview and benefits. White supremacy is a useful concept to understand the bigger picture of race in the United States, but there is apprehension among White people to use the term White supremacy (DiAngelo, 2018). White supremacy is intended to capture the overall social, political, and economic systems of dominance by White people, but is often conflated with individual actions from White supremacists (DiAngelo, 2016). The apprehension of using this term is likely the product of Whiteness and evolving concepts of racism. It is hard for White people to acknowledge the systems providing them an elevated status and benefits (Ryde, 2019).

The aforementioned concepts are helpful to unpack what it means to be White in a racialized society. Whiteness and White privilege insulate White people from race-related stresses in daily existence. When confronted about White racial privilege, White people often display a range of emotional reactions. DiAngelo (2018) refers to this disequilibrium as *White fragility*, "a state which even a minimum amount of racial stress in the habitus intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves" (p. 117). The inward feelings of White fragility often include being singled out, shamed, or judged for having unearned privilege. Outward behaviors feature crying, denial, emotional withdrawal, arguing, and seeking forgiveness. Some scholars note how these emotions change the dynamic of discussing race, especially when White participants expect these emotions to absolve guilt (Obear & Martinez, 2013). In a study with White college students, Foste (2019) critiqued how Whites expect to "confess their sins and transform into racially enlightened individuals" (p. 251). While conversations can be emotional and cathartic, these behaviors do not excuse White individuals from dialogue on White supremacy.

**White Privilege and College Students.** As a result of new research, scholars have critiqued White identity development models for college students and asserted they are no longer appropriate to name Whiteness (Foste & Jones, 2020). In a qualitative study, Hardiman and Keehn (2012) explored the perspectives of 10 White college students who were largely unaware of their cultural heritage and racial identity. Most students perceived White as being as "neutral" or "ordinary" and any other racial identity was considered an alternative to the normalcy of Whiteness. As a dominant identity in society, these White students could not see themselves as having a distinct racial identity. Instead, they simply considered themselves individuals. Hardiman and Keehn also found racial "codes" in language embedded into White student views about crime, welfare, and urban areas.

The perceptions of White students found in more recent studies minimize the socially constructed nature of being White. In a narrative inquiry study among 10 White college students, Foste (2019) observed how participants downplayed acts of discrimination and shared narratives of racial harmony on campus. The participants were specifically recruited because they were recommended as White students who were reflective about Whiteness. Yet, Foste identified patterns of White privilege in their narratives about racial protests and campus climate.

**Fostering Awareness of White Privilege.** Cocurricular and curricular efforts to educate students on diversity are effective in reducing racial bias (Denson, 2009). Many activities, and their corresponding research studies, were designed on the foundational work by McIntosh (1988). As the statements about the invisible knapsack are easy to access and understand, it is a widely used tool for education around White privilege (Niehuis, 2005). During these activities, White students usually gain the most from diversity education (Denson, 2009; Steward et al., 2012).

Although conversations about race with peers is helpful for learning, students of color do not gain as much or anything. (Johnson & Mincer, 2017; Steward

et al., 2012). Seider et al. (2013) noticed students of color were apprehensive of engaging in conversations with White peers due to their inaccurate or naive views on race. Other studies have suggested these activities and conversations place students of color in the role of a teacher (Cabrera, 2014). Even utilizing McIntosh's statements as an activity to prompt discussions, these activities still rely on students of color to further White students' awareness on racial bias (Boatright-Horowitz et al., 2013). There needs to be a shift within these learning methods, which rely too heavily on peers of color, to a new approach for White privilege education. The social change model for leadership provides a framework useful for this purpose.

**Social Change Model of Leadership.** The use of leadership development to explore racial identity may be an effective method to have conversations with White students about White privilege. As the most widely used leadership theory in student affairs, the social change model for leadership contains promising concepts for learning from peers (Wagner, 2011). The model features eight values divided into three domains: individual, group, and societal values. Unlike some development models, these domains are not sequential in which one level must be completed before the next. Each domain can concurrently influence the development of the other. As students interact in a group, it may prompt a reevaluation of their individual values.

**Consciousness-of-Self.** Consciousness-of-self is an individual value of the social change model centered on a complex self-awareness. It is not to be confused with self-consciousness, which is a worry about what others think. Rather, consciousness-of-self is an attentiveness to one's presence in leadership. This self-awareness is cognizant of the greater social environment. It is built by self-exploration and monitoring behavior (Early & Fincher, 2017). Consciousness-of-self is further broken down into sub-concepts of identifying core values,

empathy, mindfulness, self-efficacy, social perspective taking, and social identity exploration. While all these sub-categories are important, social perspective taking and social identity exploration have the strongest applications for assisting White students explore race and leadership.

*Social perspective taking (SPT)* involves considering someone else's point of view. It provides individuals the ability to empathize with another, yet still maintain core values without conflict (Early & Cooney, 2017). SPT exists in an individual value domain, yet researchers have found SPT to be linked with development in group domains (Dugan et al., 2014).

*Social identity exploration (SIE)* is also relevant for discussions around racial and leadership identities. This component of consciousness-of-self encourages awareness regarding different dimensions of identity such as gender, race, sexual orientation, socioeconomic background, religion, and other identities. Both concepts are important in leadership development, but are highly relevant in fostering awareness of White privilege. McIntosh's (1988) concept of unpacking White privilege is almost exclusively based on statements to prompt SPT and SIE.

New approaches are needed to examine how privilege and leadership can be infused together in a model. Without creating a new model, consciousness-of-self may be the most appropriate model for White students to develop leadership skills while cultivating an awareness of privilege. As an individual value domain, consciousness-of-self is primarily an intrapersonal process. Yet, it does not need to be fully reflective because SPT can prompt development through group value domains. Through this leadership framework, White students can develop

awareness of their racial identity before engaging in a diverse social context.

## Method

The purpose of my study was to explore how four White student leaders make meaning of leadership and race through the use of a relevant leadership framework. Optimized by the research design, this study employed a narrative methodology to share how students progressed through the series of three meetings. The use of narrative inquiry created generalized themes built through participants' stories while inviting tensions and contractions of a dominant social script (Clandinin, 2006; Daiute, 2013). Particularly well suited for identity development, the narrative methodology offered participants the opportunity to examine and even create their own social constructs through telling stories (Daiute, 2013).

The research questions were specifically tailored to explore the storied lives of four White student leaders when discussing race in leadership. The following questions offered a primary inquiry which sustained an entire hour-long meeting:

Q1 What narratives do White student leaders tell about their leadership identity?

Q2 What narratives do White student leaders tell regarding their racial identity?

Q3 How do White student leaders make meaning of White privilege through a leadership framework?

Each question and the corresponding meeting created a scaffolding for increasingly complex discussions. Through the use of a constructivist paradigm, these stories were linked together to generate knowledge about the confluence between leadership and race.

**Caucusing as a Method.** This study also used a racial caucus as a group interview method to explore race within leadership. A caucus is a group focused on a single social identity, such as being White (Obear & martinez, 2013). Often used by social

justice educators, caucusing gathers participants to explore power, privilege, and oppression associated within a single identity (Davis et al., 2018; Walls et al., 2010). These identity groups are homogenous, only composed by those who share the identity, allowing for honest and intimate conversation (Obear & martinez, 2013). Unlike focus groups, caucusing enables researchers the ability to maintain focus on uncomfortable topics.

Giles and Rivers (2009) used caucusing as method to illustrate how learning about a sensitive topic can differ based on social identity. When teaching about colonialization in New Zealand, they assumed students who did not have an indigenous identity entered the classroom with very little knowledge about colonization. Their study sought to use caucusing as a method to separate participants based on their identity to avoid relying on the lived experiences of indigenous students to educate others. Caucusing established an environment where students with dominant identities could ask questions without relying on indigenous students to teach them - effectively providing indigenous students refuge from resistance or defensiveness.

In a scholarly article, Obear and martinez (2013) advocate for caucuses to explore White privilege. They claim these spaces provide opportunities for White individuals to transition away from feelings of shame, guilt, or defensiveness about racial privilege and convert their feelings into a commitment towards changing themselves. White caucus participants might also realize they can learn from each other when taking action to dismantle racism. Most importantly, it does not place people of color in educator roles; White individuals may develop a sense of responsibility for educating themselves.

My study used caucusing to construct a narrative about processing privilege with White student leaders. The members of this caucus came together three times in one semester. Each caucus was prompted by an activity to generate discussion. The first caucus employed an identity check-list activity asking participants to circle words describing their

leadership identity. The second caucus repurposed the same check-list, but asked for descriptors of their White identity. In the final caucus, participants were provided with statements about White Privilege and were asked to indicate if the statements applied to their own student leader experience.

The content for these activities was adapted from established resources such as Leadership for a Better World (Komives & Wagner, 2017), Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice (Bell et al., 2016), and White Awareness (Katz, 2003). After the completion of each activity, semi-structured reflection questions were posed. While the stimuli of the activities produced immediate insights, the reflection questions fostered an environment for participants could engage in SPT and SIE. The exchange of stories and personal beliefs enabled the group to cocreate a narrative.

**Data Collection.** The site for data collection was a single four-year public institution within the rocky mountain region of the United States. For the purpose of this study, this institution is labeled Frontier State University or simply referenced as Frontier. This site was selected because it is considered a predominately White institution which would maximize participant recruitment. At the time of the study, overall enrollment was less than 15,000 students and the institution was mostly White with a small Latinx population. White students composed over 70% of the student population. Since there are several PWIs that resemble this profile in the region, this context afforded relative anonymity to student leaders who might be prominent figures on campus.

The primary technique for collecting data was video recording during the one-hour caucuses. Before recording, participants were asked to complete the informed consent and chose participant pseudonyms. The group also got to know each other through an introduction providing a student's class standing, major, and leadership role on campus. The video recordings were digitally collected and stored, in compliance with institutional review board (IRB) regulations. Transcripts were created for the purpose of coding and analysis.

**Participant Selection and Attrition.** The strategy used to select participants involved a non-probable technique of purposive sampling. In this type of sampling, participants are chosen because of their desired characteristics (Dixon et al., 2019). The outreach for finding these individuals required networking with student affairs professionals at the research site to identify recruitment opportunities. These professionals provided access to student leader gatherings such as student government, volunteer organizations, Greek councils, and entertainment programming boards. A script was required for these visits to ensure all critical information was tactfully conveyed.

Purposive sampling requires criteria to select participants. The criteria for my study required participants to identify as traditionally-aged, a student leader, and White. Obear and martinez (2013) propose participation of White identity caucuses based on two qualifiers: those who identify as White or those who experience White skin privilege. The latter addition acknowledges the complexity of participant selection based on race. An individual may ethnically or culturally identify as a person of color, but may have fair enough skin to still benefit from White privilege. Due to the problematic nature of evaluating one's race, the student participants self-identified their own race and skin privilege.

Seven students at Frontier State University agreed to participate in the study after a two-week recruitment process in February of 2020. There was heavy communication leading up to the first meeting. Each participant received no less than three correspondences via text and email. Among the seven who expressed interest, only four students showed up for the first caucus. I had anticipated attrition due to the sensitive nature of the topic and purposely recruited beyond my predetermined capacity of six participants. However, I was surprised when the attrition happened at the first meeting. One student gave me advance notice within an hour of the first caucus, but I did not hear anything from the remaining two individuals. Despite my recruitment efforts in organizations open to all class-standings,

there were no first-year students who participated.

**Analysis and Quality.** A hybrid of two established frameworks were used for data analysis: narrative analysis with longitudinal coding. Narrative analysis is concerned with organizing and making meaning of stories on multiple levels (Doucet, 2019). Data was analyzed in multiple perspectives through use of the listening guide to understand ontological; social, public, and cultural; and conceptual layers (Gilligan, 2015). Data was coded using longitudinal coding of narrative concepts, rather than narrative coding. While narrative coding is primarily characterized by literary elements, the use of longitudinal coding is intended to capture the temporal nature of interactions. Saldaña (2016) suggests longitudinal type of coding is most appropriate for studies that explore identity, change, and development. Comparisons between each caucus provided insight on development of individuals and the overall group.

Quality of the research is assured through hallmarks of good constructivist studies - authenticity and trustworthiness (Lincoln et al., 2017). In narrative inquiry, it is critical to demonstrate these two qualities by telling the story of participants in the most accurate and ethical manner (Clandinin et al., 2018). My study heavily relied on member checking during to ensure credibility in the narratives. Analytic memos served as an audit trail to trace my decisions for dependability, but also highlight reflexivity in the research.

**Researcher Stance.** A constructivist researcher has a strong influence in research design and outcomes. Lincoln et al. (2017) characterized a constructivist as “passionate participant” who holds a participant-observer role. As the caucus facilitator, but also a participant, there was a need to understand how my background influences the study. I share the racial identity held by the participants in the caucus, and I have experienced similar formative experiences. This included minimizing the significance of Whiteness or lacking an understanding of my own race. Yet, our experiences around race were not identical. I was much older than the participants and grew up in a

different part of the country. In this constructivist research, I was conscious of these considerations to mitigate premature comparisons.

Some scholars have emphasized a need to respect perspectives shared by participants in constructivist research, especially if they differ from one’s own beliefs (Denicolo et al., 2016). However, when examining issues laden with power dynamics, other researchers have utilized constructivism with a hybrid framework blending constructivism with a critical cultural paradigm (Kunstman, 2017). A critical stance in constructivism suggests a researcher has agency to challenge power and privilege in an unapologetic manner (Guido et al., 2010). Researchers must critically evaluate constructs, such as racist beliefs, and determine how they are problematic. In this regard, my nuanced constructivist paradigm does not preclude a critical perspective of the participant’s narratives.

## Findings

My study explored how four White student leaders make meaning of their racial identity through leadership concepts. Using the consciousness-of-self framework, an emphasis on self-exploration opened the door to difficult conversations around race. Designed with a constructivist paradigm and narrative methodology, the study elicited the stories of students to coconstruct a new narrative of leadership and race. Stories revealed tensions in the confluences, but also signaled how leadership can amplify racial awareness among White student leaders.

**Narratives about Student Leadership.** These four White student leaders found commonality in their stories and discovered shared narratives. The first narrative to emerge illustrated how family served as role models and encouraged leadership development. Lauren was the first to share a story,

My mom got laid off from her job and she decided she was going to open a brewery. It was solely women owned, in a men

dominated industry. She's had it open for six years now. And she's definitely showed me, if you have it in you, just keep pushing forward.

Lauren's story conveyed values of perseverance and hard work as her mother overcame adversity of losing a job. Her mother's leadership in a male-dominated industry served as her inspiration.

Quinn shared a comparable story about her father, "My dad was always such a leader within his work and his community... the ideal leader." She elaborated on his success despite socioeconomic disadvantages, "He lived in a trailer park for a while and now he has his Ph.D. He has always demonstrated hard work pays off and pushed me to have leadership roles." Both Lauren and Quinn's stories feature middle-class families with a primary character who must overcome financial hardship. Embedded in these stories were messages about the value of hard work in leadership, without the considerations of systematic advantages of race.

#### **Earning Leadership Opportunities.**

During the first caucus on leadership, the students encountered conflict regarding how leadership opportunities are obtained. Lauren and Quinn felt leadership was the product of hard work. Lauren asserted, "I really do think you have to follow before you lead... you gotta go through some stuff before you know how to take someone else through it." She believed leaders must be competent and earn their knowledge from experience. Quinn indicated "The leaders I know are people who had to work for it... it wasn't necessarily handed to them." Her use of the word "handed" suggests an evaluation of how leadership is obtained. Hardworking people earn leadership, while some obtain leadership without working for it.

The conversation remained cordial as Riley offered a counter perspective for the group to consider, "I have experiences

with leadership development being a privileged space... if you are someone from a marginalized group, you might not have access to those experiences." Riley was suggesting leadership opportunities may not be available as a result of social identities. From Riley's perspective, earned leadership conflicted with notions of access and opportunity. This exchange represented the first time these White student leaders challenged each other in the caucus format.

When the group reconvened in the second caucus to discuss race, I asked if participants wanted to share anything about the last meeting. Lauren immediately began the conversation by acknowledging how Riley's comments prompted reconsideration. She shared, "Your last point about earning it... that was stuck in my head the rest of the night... I didn't come up with anything, but it was just on my mind." Riley's challenge prompted Lauren to reevaluate her philosophy on leadership. Lauren's willingness to share her thoughts also demonstrated the power of caucusing with White student leaders – group dialogue could augment beliefs.

**Narratives about Racial Identity.** Despite the varying personal experiences and comfort levels, these students shared several narratives about their racial identity in the second caucus. They expressed defensiveness, resistance, or silence around the stereotypes of White people. Quinn lamented how "People always think White people are rich." Lauren shared similar frustrations, "Always. And you'll never know until you actually talk to somebody and learn about their life. But those are the statements made right away just because you're White." Although being wealthy could be a desirable social status, Quinn and Lauren did not want people to think they were wealthy due to race. They both came from middle-class backgrounds and shared stories about

how their parents overcame economic adversity. The assumption about wealth seemed to affront to their family narratives about earning their social status via leadership, instead implying success was conferred because of their White racial identity.

Despite resistance exhibited by some participants, these students were not shy when asked to describe White privilege. Quinn offered, "It means you have power whether you want to or not. It's just kinda there." Apollo shared, "It's the privilege of not being self-aware and just being able to occupy spaces without having to think about it all the time." Their statements did not display aversion to words such as power, privilege, ignorance, and occupying spaces. They were comfortable with the vocabulary of social justice and did not exhibit characteristics of White fragility. Although they could articulate numerous societal privileges conferred to White people, they were less apt to describe how they personally benefited from White privilege.

**The Exotic White Narrative.** These students also identified complex narratives associated with being White. The first concept emerged when the students began critiquing people who overemphasize European heritage to distance themselves from racial conversations. Through an understanding of one's own of lineage, a White person could choose a family narrative that seemed less racially oppressive. For example, a family story about how Jewish grandparents survived the holocaust is less racially charged as having ancestors who owned cotton plantations in Georgia. Conceivably, a White individual could have both lineages, but selectively tell the narrative they felt most socially appropriate.

Riley deemed this phenomenon as being "exotic White." The combination of these two words convey a complex meaning with an intimation of satire. Through caucusing, these students articulated the White identity as accepted, natural,

or unimportant. Their descriptions were congruent with literature suggesting White college students view their race as normal or ordinary. In contrast, exotic implies a foreign or uncommon characteristic, perhaps from an alluring story within someone's White identity. The exotic White label is an ironic satire of those who overemphasize their lineages.

The implications of the exotic White narrative are more significant than the literal meaning. In this concept, the saliency of European ethnic identity displaces the meaning of a racial identity in the United States. Quinn affirmed this implication, "I don't think of my identity as a White American. I just think of my ties back to Europe and I just think that is so weird." These students discovered through caucusing how the exotic White narrative intentionally conflates ethnic and racial identities to distance White students from the implications of race.

In a moment of vulnerability, Riley's revealed the temptation of this narrative, "I want to go to my other side where they're refugees from Poland." Her comments suggest the Polish narrative is not as problematic as her Mayflower lineage. She then admitted why, "I really want to go into spaces and not be the problem. I'm like 'I'm not that bad, you know?'" As literature has indicated, racism is often seen as a moral issue characterized by overtly hateful people. When racism becomes a moral issue, rather than a systematic issue, Whites seek to distance themselves to not appear bad. The exotic White construct is another manifestation of this distancing.

Reflective of the student's satirical comments and laughter, they recognized absurdity in overemphasizing European genealogy. In particular, they mocked how a White person could showcase their

genealogical breakdown as it was a prized pedigree. In contrast, Apollo noted how most people of color could not furnish such a record in the United States. And if they could, it would likely contain atrocities of colonialism. The exotic White construct was not just a behavior maintaining Whiteness, it constituted a privilege exclusively available to White people.

### **The Voice of the Voiceless Narrative.**

Even the self-identified activists, Apollo and Riley, struggled to reconcile their White privilege and leadership roles. This became evident as Riley reflected on her journey,

When I first got into social justice, I didn't quite understand privilege and like where to use it. And so, I did the thing I've seen my friends do – being the voice for the voiceless. Because, I'm like "Oh, I have the privilege to be the voice." But I shouldn't be the voice. I should help or be there for someone.

A "voice" is code for one with power. Riley's phrase "voice for the voiceless" suggests a desire to help those who are marginalized in society and cannot advocate for themselves.

Riley felt compelled to use privilege for advocacy, but she realized it was problematic. "I think some voices aren't included for a reason and I would just keep allowing White voices to only be heard if I was the voice for the voiceless." Apollo elaborated, "I used to think, like Riley, that using your privilege effectively was speaking for people who weren't represented. And through more exposure began to realize it's changing the landscape of the social arena that you're in to accommodate those voices and let them be heard independently."

They could recognize how White people, speaking for people of color, perpetuated

White supremacy because people of color were still prevented from speaking. However, it was unclear how these White student leaders altered their environment to make space for voices. Quinn was the only one to verbally acknowledge this reality, "The whole thing with not speaking for people who don't have a voice, but also finding a way to include them? Like that's just hard. That's something you have to think about." It seemed these White student leaders grasped the concept in an intellectual manner, but it remained difficult to integrate into their leadership.

### **Confluences of Leadership and Race.**

Analysis of longitudinal codes revealed how the students began to reconcile the tensions in their leadership and racial narratives. In the first caucus, the word of "awareness" seldom appeared in conversation. By the third meeting, awareness became pervasive as they integrated race into leadership. Admittedly, awareness meant something different for each member in the group. Lauren and Quinn expressed a newfound wakefulness about the pervasiveness of Whiteness. Riley felt the conversations brought a greater sense of urgency to her anti-racism efforts. Apollo shared his desire to engage his White peers in dialogue about White privilege.

Awareness had no universal meaning in their shared narrative. Similar to the multiple realities purported in constructivism, the meaning of awareness differed among each participant. The students tailored the meaning of awareness for their own leadership purpose. The incongruous meaning of awareness was significant; it was not dependent on a certain threshold of racial awareness as found in development models. Instead, each student could share how they cultivated their awareness with personal relevance in their own reality.

By the end of our meetings, awareness had also evolved into a newer coded concept of amplification when Apollo suggested, "I think good leadership

should amplify racial awareness for anyone". There are several meanings embedded into this profound statement. It is an evaluative comment marked by the word "good" and indicates ideal leadership should contain racial awareness. A "good" leader would know the significance of race in their organization. Apollo's statement also implies leadership has the power to enlarge understanding of race. The word "amplify" is a summative code for these confluences. Racial awareness is magnified through conscious leadership. As awareness might mean different things for each of these student leaders, the effect of amplification likely results in different outcomes.

## Discussion

College was a new opportunity for these students to define their leadership identity, but most of them emulated the stories of their parents. Parental figures demonstrated hard work would earn appropriate leadership roles which led to financial success. This narrative concretely linked individual leadership with economic mobility. The message of earning leadership is logical, but also contains hints of a larger societal narrative. Specifically, the idea that anyone can improve their own socioeconomic status without external help. Often referred to as the "bootstraps" narrative, this common American lore purports anyone can succeed with only hard work and strong moral character (Goode & Keefer, 2016).

The bootstraps grand narrative also provides an explanation for why people fail to improve their own situation. Those who fail are presumed to be unmotivated or deficient. In the earned leadership construct, individuals who are unable to prove themselves are not provided leadership opportunities. When leadership opportunity was provided without the prescribed hard work, two participants described it as being "handed" leadership. This phrasing is closely associated with a handout – something given freely to someone. A handout can carry a heavy connotation, especially as a pejorative reference to social welfare programs.

The earned leadership narrative conveyed a distinct picture of how an individual becomes a leader. It required an individual to be knowledgeable of the context, proven by trial, and accepted among others. This concept inherently purveyed exclusivity for leadership. Not everybody was worthy to hold a leadership position: one must contain the right mix of qualities or follow a specific path. However, it does not consider how other societal structures impact this way of thinking. For example, how does bias towards certain social identities shape the evaluation of one's competence? Even if an individual held the proper qualifications for leadership, bias would limit opportunities for those who are not as accepted.

When we began discussing race, these implications of racial privilege generated defensiveness among the students. White privilege, in the context of leadership development, suggested race may be more significant than hard work when obtaining leadership opportunity. This racial narrative potentially negated a social agreement alleging hard work guarantees leadership roles. Consequently, racial privilege seemed to threaten a social agreement and produced cognitive dissonance.

Reconciling these conflicting narratives found in leadership and race proved challenging. The challenge was especially evident in the students' initial reluctance to make connections to their leadership roles. Our conversation regarding the exotic White narrative demonstrated how privilege was easy to discuss as a detached intellectual concept, but harder to acknowledge in a personal reality. However, the vulnerability displayed by a few students enabled us to progress beyond external applications. Morality still surfaced when discussing the responsibility in White privilege, but these student leaders were able to cultivate their own concept of awareness. By the final meeting, we came to a consensus about leadership and race - good leadership should amplify racial awareness for anyone.

## Recommendations and Limitations

This research attracted White students who wanted to talk about race to become a better leader, but the framework of consciousness-of-self empowered evaluation of deeply held beliefs in an accelerated manner. As early as the first meeting, these students began tracing the confluences between White privilege and student leadership. They challenged their philosophy about leadership opportunity and uncovered complex beliefs pertaining to Whiteness. These examples illustrate how SPT and SIE originate from group dialogue. The social change model for leadership inherently welcomes the examination of power and privilege.

It is recommended leadership educators adopt caucusing as a research and teaching method. At the time of this study, there was a small handful of scholarly articles on caucusing. Most of these resources did not use caucusing as a research method, but instead presented it as a tool for teaching. Identity work is likely the greatest application, but caucusing is an innovative method to delve into other identities influencing leadership such as masculinity, faith, political affiliations, physical and cognitive abilities, military service, sexuality, or parental status.

Caucusing is an underdeveloped tool and should be implemented with caution. If an educator is not prepared to facilitate a caucus, they may cause more harm than learning. Unintentional efforts can also drive participants into the recesses of defensiveness. There are a number of resources referenced in this research study which may be useful to prepare (Blitz & Kohl, 2012; Obear & Martinez, 2013; Walls et al., 2010). In addition to reading about caucusing, it would be beneficial for a prospective facilitator to participate in a single-identity caucus. A facilitator can hone skills by observing how others navigate difficult conversations. Caucusing opportunities are often found at social justice conferences or on-campus workshops. If this preparation is not possible, it may be beneficial to collaborate with a skilled facilitator.

It is also worth noting this methodology contains

inherent limitations. In particular, these qualitative findings should not be generalized among all White students. This study was designed to shed insight on how some White student leaders make meaning of their racial privilege. Findings may be informative for crafting course curriculum or designing future research studies, but leadership educators should evaluate how to apply this knowledge in their specific context.

## Conclusion

The theoretical framework of the study, consciousness-of-self, enabled these students to discuss race. Leadership served as a gateway to enroll White students into conversations they would rather avoid and caucusing served as a powerful tool to dig into a privileged identity. These students had challenged each other, recognized their own problematic narratives, and co-constructed a new narrative. In the process, they found leadership amplified their racial awareness. Their leadership and racial identities were altered as a result of participating. The understanding of their narrative has potential and prospects for other White student leaders, leadership education, and higher education professionals.

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