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Unpacking the White Savior Complex:
How Identity and Socialization Impact Youth Development Work

By:

Mercedes Reed

reed.mercedes@gmail.com

Capstone Research Report Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Master of Nonprofit Administration Degree in the School of Management
directed by Dr. Marco Tavanti

San Francisco, California

Spring 2018

Abstract

Unpacking the White Savior Complex: How Identity & Socialization Impact Youth Development Work focuses on how to create authentic connections between individuals from privileged and marginalized communities. This report contains a literature review focusing on the white savior complex, white privilege, identity development and cultural relevant practices. Primary data includes an analysis of values highlighted through expert interviews and a survey focused on identity development within youth developers. Recommendations focus on organizational practices and common values used to better understand how identity and socialization affect our personal and professional worlds.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank all members of my Masters in Nonprofit Administration cohort for their continued feedback, challenge and support in the last two years. I have learned so much from each of you.

Thank you to Dr. Marco Tavanti, for pushing me to think from a space of justice and empowerment to all.

Thank you to my parents for their unconditional encouragement and support.

Thank you to my partner, Natalie, for your continuous listening ear. To have a partner that shares the same passions, makes this work even more rewarding. Thank you.

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Section 1. Introduction

The essence of much of nonprofit work is to create organizations and programs to help those in need. Many of the times, these organizations are created by people who have the time and resources to be able to give back. And many of the times, these creators come from privileged communities and are predominantly white. While the intention of giving back and helping those who are underserved is a noble effort, many times white people of privilege working in underserved communities may be entering the space with a conscious or subconscious mentality that they will rescue or save the underserved communities, just by being there. What those who are coming into the underserved community fail to understand is how their privileged life experiences paired with a lack of understanding of the oppressive systems we all operate in, could have more a negative impact on those they are serving than a positive.

The White Savior Complex is the idea that people who benefit from white privilege are wanting to help those in underserved communities for their own benefit more than that of the communities. “The White Savior Industrial Complex is not about justice. It is about having a big emotional experience that validates privilege,” said Teju Cole in his seven-part Tweet that coined the term. This complex concept manifests itself in many spaces including entertainment, media, disaster relief, education, policy, politics, law enforcement and more.

The purpose of the following research is to unpack how the White Savior Complex continues to manifest in youth development and education. The following report consists of a literature review of work focused on the white savior complex, white privilege, identity

development and culturally relevant pedagogy. Primary data includes expert interviews with four youth development professionals and results from a survey that focused on identity development in youth development workers. The report will follow up with recommendations based on all the research and data collected.

Section 2: Literature Review

In order to understand the White Savior Complex, many different concepts need to be examined. The literature review will focus on research that discussed the White Savior Complex in addition to related subtopics including white privilege, identity development and cultural relevant pedagogy.

White Savior Complex

The White Savior Complex has manifested itself in many different ways throughout history. Whether it is through time or money, many people of privilege want to “give back” to communities that are underserved and marginalized in order to balance out the injustices in the world. These short-lived actions, while well intentioned, do not disrupt the very reason this need for rebalance is occurring in the first place. Teju Cole wrote a piece in *The Atlantic*, summarizing this mentality, “What innocent heroes don't always understand is that they play a useful role for people who have much more cynical motives. The White Savior Industrial Complex is a valve for releasing the unbearable pressures that build in a system built on pillage. We can participate in the economic destruction of Haiti over long years, but when the earthquake strikes it feels good to send \$10 each to the rescue fund. I have no opposition, in principle, to such donations (I frequently make them myself), but we must do such things only with awareness of what else is involved. If we are going to interfere in the lives of others, a little due diligence is a minimum requirement” (Cole, 2012).

Many other researchers have expanded on the juxtaposition of helping in short term while perpetuating the root causes of the problems in the long term. Paulo Friere in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was one of the first to assert language to the idea that “giving back” is not true generosity.

“Any attempt to soften the power of the oppressor in deference to the weakness of the oppressed almost always manifests itself in the form of false generosity; indeed the attempt never goes beyond this. In order to have the continued opportunity to express their generosity, the oppressor must perpetuate injustice as well. An unjust social order is the permanent fount of this generosity which is nourished by death, despair and poverty. This is why the dispensers of false generosity become desperate at the slight threat of its source. True generosity consists precisely in fighting to destroy the causes which nourish false charity. False charity constrains the fearful subdued “the rejects of life” to extend their trembling hands. True generosity lies in striving so these hands, whether individuals or entire people, need be extended less and less in supplication so that more and more they become human hands, which work, and working transform the world” (Friere, 2000).

The question is not, how do I help those in need? But what is causing the need to occur in the first place.

When people of privilege are coming into marginalized communities, much of the mentality is focused on what one person can do to help those in need. The research however focuses on shifting the mentality from the individual to the systematic. In *No More Heroes*,

Jordan Flaherty highlighted how the White Savior Complex arises in many spaces from movies to disaster relief. “The savior mentality is not about individual failings. It is the logical result of a racist, colonialist, capitalist, hetero-patriarchal system setting us up against each other” (Flaherty, 2018, p.18). To come in and think that one can help while continuing to perpetuate the root causes of the problem is doing little good and is creating more harm to a community. Cole continued on with this statement, “because there is much more to doing good work than ‘making a difference.’ There is the principle of first do no harm. There is the idea that those who are being helped ought to be consulted over the matters that concerns them” (Cole, 2012). Julio Cammarota gave more language to these issues in the article “Blindsided by the Avatar: White Saviors and Allies Out of Hollywood and in Education,” “The White Savior Syndrome has the tendency to render people of color incapable of helping themselves—infantile or hapless and helpless victims who survive by instinct. People of color supposedly lack the capacity to seek change and thus become perceived as dispossessed of historical agency. Any progress or success tends to result from the succor of the white individual, which suggests that escaping poverty or ignorance happens only through the savior’s intelligence” (Cammarota, 2011). People from privilege who want to truly help those in need must look at the root causes of the suffering in addition to working in tandem with those from marginalized communities.

When looking at how to dismantle the White Savior Complex, we must first unpack white privilege. Peggy McInstosh’s article “Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” explained the layers that need to be peeled away to understand how privilege is built into systems. “My

schooling gave me no training in seeing myself as an oppressor, as an unfairly advantaged person or as a participant in a damaged culture. I was taught to see myself as an individual whose moral state depended on her individual moral will. My schooling followed the pattern my colleague Elizabeth Minnich has pointed out: Whites are taught to think of their lives as morally neutral, normative, and average, and also ideal, so that when we work to benefit others, this is seen as work which will allow ‘them’ to be more like ‘us’” (McInstosh, 1990). With White people being in a dominant culture, all different types of white people are represented in our society. We have an understanding that White people are individuals with different experiences, backgrounds and interests. On the other hand, the understanding of subordinate cultures is many times restricted to stereotypes and limited individual experiences which creates a narrow view of marginalized communities. Jennifer Holladay deconstructed how white privilege shapes perspective in, “White Anti-Racist Activism: A Personal Roadmap:”

“The thing that white privilege does is shape the way in which we view the world and the way in which the world views us. The perks and advantages described [below] are part of this phenomenon, but not all of it. Consider the following:

- When I am told about our national heritage or “civilization,” I am shown that people of my color made it what it is.
- Related, the schools that I attend or have attended use standard textbooks, which widely reflect people of my color and their contributions to the world.

- When I look at the national currency or see photographs of monuments on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., I see people of my race widely represented and celebrated.

As a White person, I see myself represented in all of these places. And, until a couple of years ago, I never questioned that representation — or why people of color were excluded. After all, people like me have done a lot for this country and for the world. If people of color had done their part, so the theory goes, they too would see themselves represented.”

With all of this sub textual education and language, the White Savior Complex is not the fault of the individual, but of the way in which history and current society shapes the way we see the world. White privilege can be a difficult concept to be aware of and often times needs to be pointed out and worked on continuously.

In most cases, many White people from privileged backgrounds do not have a full and comprehensive understanding of the pervasiveness of their privilege and how it permeates into all parts of their life. These subconscious actions and thoughts continue to move a racist and oppressive society forward, which can be extremely damaging, especially in education. *No More Heroes* emphasized how white privilege reveals itself in the classroom. “White teachers aren’t required to have any analysis of systems of white supremacy or anti-Blackness and their own complicity in both before they enter classrooms to teach Black children, some of whom will be introduced to those realities by the behaviors of these white teachers. Having done little or none of the necessary work required to examine their complicity, what gives these teachers the right to

teach our children? How have they earned the privilege of being such an influential figure in a Black child's life? Why do we grant them access to the minds of our vulnerable youth, who will already have to face so much racism in the world?" (Flaherty, 2018, p. 108). In *The Guide for White Women Who Teach Black Boys*, the authors argued the responsibility of White teachers to be aware of their white privilege. "So often, when we write or talk about race in education, the discussion focuses squarely on the outcomes of students of color. But when we step back to see that most of our teachers are White, most administrators are White, most educational policymakers are White, most curriculum writers are White, and most teacher educators are White—then we get a much clearer picture of race in education" (Moore, Michael, & Penick-Parks, 2018, p. 7). So how do we shift these invasive and oppressive mentalities? It first starts with a look at ourselves.

White Identity Development & Socialization

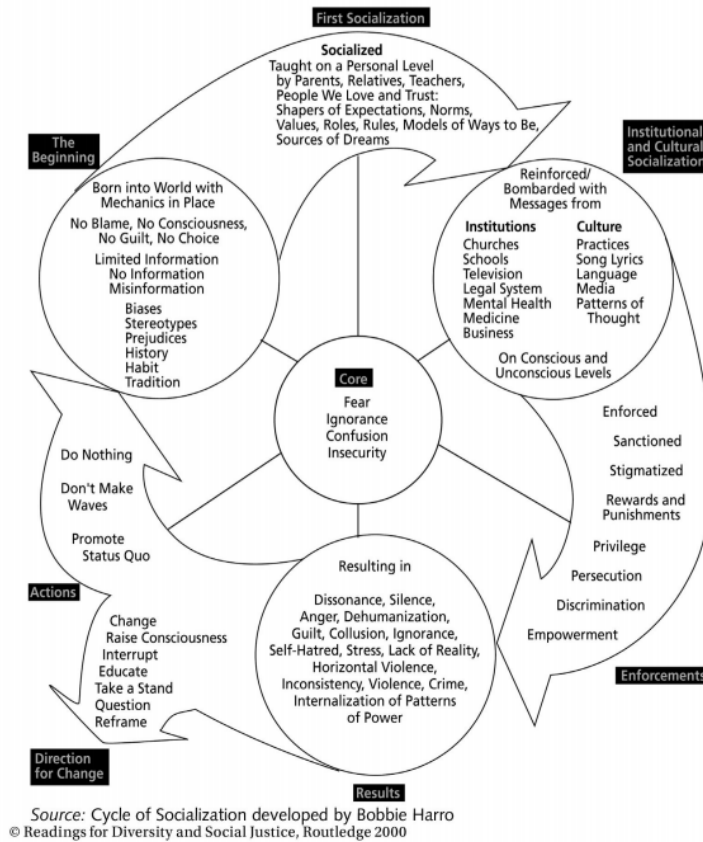
When looking at how to shift White saviors into White alleys, a White person must understand their own Whiteness. For many White people, they do not see their identity as something to unpack. Many of our White students in the United States think racism does not affect them because they are not people of color, they do not see "whiteness" as a racial identity (McInstosh, 1990). Beverly Tatum in *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria* continued to expand on this idea, "Whiteness [is] simply an unexamined norm. Because [they] represent the societal norm, Whites can easily reach adulthood without thinking much about their racial group...there is a lot of silence about race in White communities, and as

a consequence, Whites tend to think of racial identity as something that other people have, not something that is salient for them” (Tatum, 2017, pp. 186-7). When the White dominant culture is represented not only in your own community but also in media, politics, entertainment and more, examining one’s self is not as obvious. *The Guide for White Women Who Teach Black Boys* related this concept to the classroom, “Understanding Whiteness in education is key to understanding Blackness in education. It has been said that the first rule of multiculturalism is understanding one’s own culture. Whiteness is not often seen as a culture. It is more often seen—especially by White people—as invisible or as the norm. But Whiteness is just as much a part of the racial hierarchy—and every racial problem—as any other racial group in the United States. So, if we believe that Blackness matters in our teaching relationships—Whiteness must matter too” (Moore et al., 2018, p. 14). As the research stated, having an understanding of the importance of Whiteness is imperative in to combating the White Savior Complex.

As Whiteness is unpacked, there can be a lot of questions brought up around race, culture and society. During this process, it is important to explain how we came to be in order for people to understand how their communities and life experiences have shaped them. When learning about all of these concepts, it is important to explain how everyone has been molded by our individual circumstances and are a result of

unconscious socialization. The Cycle of Socialization (Figure 1) shows how interactions with the people and systems in our

Figure 1: Cycle of Socialization



Source: *Teaching for Diversity & Social Justice*

lives can unintentionally enforce a way of thinking, acting and being. (Adams et al., 2016, p. 107). Using this tool can allow White people to recognize their Whiteness in relation to their families, schools, politics, religion and more. Explaining the socialization that happens around all

of us will support one's journey in understanding their identity on both an individual and systematic level.

As a person moves forward in understanding their Whiteness, they will move through the stages of identity development. Rita Hardiman proposed these stages in "White Identity Development: A Process Oriented Model for Describing the Racial Consciousness of White Americans." These stages are named: (1) Lack of Social Consciousness, which is characterized by a lack of awareness of racial differences and racism; (2) Acceptance, marked by the acceptance of White racist beliefs, behaviors and the unconscious identification with Whiteness; (3) Resistance, characterized by the rejection of internalized racist beliefs, messages and rejection of Whiteness; (4) Redefinition, marked by the development of a new White identity that transcends racism; (5) Internalization, marked by the integration of the new White identity into all other aspects of the identity and into consciousness and behavior (Hardiman, 1982). These stages do not happen overnight and take reflection, dialogue and observation in order to make this new understanding of Whiteness as a way of being. If this work is done fully and wholeheartedly, the path to working for justice is clearer.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Once a white person has done the personal work to understand their White identity, the next step is to understand how to respectfully interact with those who have different identities and life experiences. In education, these practices are called Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP), a term coined by educational researcher, Gloria Ladson-Billings (Emdin, 2016, p. 10).

CRP is grounded in the educator's ability to display respect and responsiveness across cultures. This work is a continuously evolving and can be defined in many different terms including culturally congruent, culturally appropriate or culturally responsive

The first part of practicing CRP is bringing the identity work mentioned above into the classroom. Christopher Emdin in *For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood* stressed how this personal development must be analyzed through the role of an educator. "The work for teachers becomes developing the self-reflection necessary to deconstruct the ways that media messages, other teachers' negative (often exaggerated) stories, and their own need to be a hero affects how they see and teach students. The teacher must work to ensure that the institution does not absolve them of the responsibility in acknowledging the baggage they bring to the classroom and analyze how they might affect student achievement. Without teachers recognizing the biases they hold and how these biases impact the ways they see and teach students, there is no starting point to change the dismal statistics related to the academic underperformance of urban youth." (Emdin, 2016, p. 43). Expecting people to be open, honest and vulnerable in a professional space can be difficult. Many people, especially educators, create strong boundaries in the work environment and often times, showing one's feelings can be seen as a sign of weakness. In order to make authentic and long lasting connections, an acknowledgement of one's unconscious and conscious socialization is crucial.

Once an educator has started the process of understanding their own identity and how socialization impacts them, it is then imperative to understand how these same concepts affect

the youth they are working with. “Race must be considered in how culturally relevant pedagogy is enacted. The delivery of CRP is, in part, the acknowledgement of who children are, how they perceive themselves, and how the world receives them” (Brown-Jeffy, S., & Cooper, J. E., 2011). Gloria Ladson-Billings expanded on difficulties of this concept for educators in *The Dreamkeepers*, “Saying we are aware of students’ race and ethnic background is not the same as saying we treat students equitably. The passion for equality in the American ethos has many teachers (and others) equating equality with sameness.” As educators develop an understanding of different identities and cultures, they can begin to adjust their curriculum and programming to be more inclusive to youth from different backgrounds.

Another staple practice in CRP is working to listen and be aware of others’ life experiences and how they have impacted their identity and way of life, especially when working with youth. The White person who has worked through his or her own racial identity process should have a deeper understanding of racism and identity struggles of people of color. White allies must engage leaders in communities of color in a dialogue based on this appreciation and respect, particularly as it pertains to the years of suffering caused by racism. This type of open and honest dialogue might be painful, and even the most well-intentioned ally might feel the need to retreat. However, allies must become compassionate listeners and remain engaged in dialogue no matter how painful it becomes (Cammorata, 2012). In order to create meaningful relationships with those from different life experiences, conversations between white people and

people of color is imperative to doing just work. As dialogue happens between people with different identities, the disruption in the Cycle of Socialization can occur on equal footing.

Many times, incorporating this self-reflection and cultural understanding is not part of the foundational learning for new educators and teachers. In the article, “What Teacher Candidates Learned about Diversity, Social Justice, and Themselves from Service-Learning Experiences,” the authors suggested a way to incorporate these ways of thinking into the teacher education through targeted service learning experiences. “Service-learning coupled with teaching for social justice requires prospective teachers to scrutinize injustices that affect teaching and learning, as well as critically examine their own assumptions and biases. When they do, they come to a broader understanding of diversity and social justice and consequently structure their classrooms and gymnasiums as culturally relevant spaces” (Baldwin, S. C., Buchanan, A. M., & Rudisill, M. E., 2007). The article went on to say, “Learning situations that promote problem posing and critical dialogue must continue to promote transformation in thought and action.” Overall in order for educators to practice CRP, they must work to empathize with cultures different than their own and analyze all aspects through a lens of social justice. The work of being cultural competent is never fully completed as our understanding of ourselves with relation to others is ever evolving.

Overall, the White Savior Complex is made up of many compounded layers. In order to combat the ill effects, one must have an understanding of their individual identity and privilege in addition to recognizing the systems and socializations they and the world operates in. Once

these concepts have been explored, then an educator should turn to look how these same ideas impact their youth. In order to reverse the savior mentality, youth workers should work to build trusted and mutually respectful relationships over time and through understanding. (Cammarota, 2012).

Section 3: Methods and Approaches

Standpoint: My personal connection to this topic is based in 10 years working in the youth development field. I identify as a white, cis-female, lesbian who grew up in predominately white, privileged communities in the Midwest. Much of my career has been working with youth of color growing up in marginalized, low-income communities. As I have developed through my career, I have considered how my identity and life experiences are different from the youth I work with and at times have felt uncomfortable or ill-equipped to make a decision that is truly best for the youth and families I work with due to my different life experience. In the last four years of work at Boys & Girls Clubs of San Francisco (BGCSF), I have been exposed to many white people from privileged backgrounds who want to work in marginalized communities of color. Unfortunately, many times, these white people of privilege do not have an understanding of how their own identity and lived experiences can be in conflict with those they are working with and have created more harm than good in their relationships with youth. All of these factors set the foundation for an interest in further understanding the White Savior Complex.

Expert Interviews: Interviews were held with four professionals working in different areas of youth development, diversity, training, management, identity work as well as personal life

experience in this topic. Perspectives collected balanced both theory, training and on the ground practice in order to compare threads of consistency and conflict.

Sangita Kumar: Founder & Principal of *Be The Change* Consulting. *Be The Change* is a nonprofit that works with youth development professionals on leadership, facilitation and social justice.

Dr. Damion Clark: Assistant Principal at KIPP SF College Prep. KIPP schools are a national network of public, charter schools that serve youth of color from marginalized communities with a strong focus on college and career readiness.

Jondou Chen: Co-Director, SEED (Seeking Educational Equity & Diversity) Project. The National SEED Project is a peer-led professional development program that creates conversational communities to drive personal, organizational, and societal change toward greater equity and diversity.

Erin Gutierrez: BGCSF Clubhouse Director in the Visitacion Valley & Sunnydale communities in San Francisco.

Expert Interview Questions: Interview questions focused on discussions about the root origins of White Savior Complex in addition to tactics on how to prevent, educate and respond to these causes.

1) How do you best educate an educator on how their own identity and life experiences have an effect on their ability to educate and mentor youth from different backgrounds than their own?

- 2) How does self-reflection and a personal understanding of social justice affect a youth developers' ability to connect and educate youth effectively?
- 3) What are examples of training activities, readings or discussions you have had during training that engage staff in authentic self-reflection around their own identity and how it relates to their work?
- 4) What are the needs to create authentic connection between privileged and underprivileged communities?
- 5) How do you see a lack of understanding of identity manifest itself in a youth developer's ability educate or mentor youth?
- 6) What resolutions tactics have you engaged in when an issue arises that is based in a staff's lack of understanding of how to their identity/privilege affects their work?

Section 4. Data Analysis

Expert Interview Overview

The expert interview responses paralleled many of the same values and factors that were explored in the literature review. All experts shared both personal and professional examples that highlighted how the White Savior Complex manifests itself in the youth development sector as well as best practices on how to approach these injustices in ways that empower individuals from marginalized communities. An overview of the interviews can be found in the appendix.

Throughout all four interview, compassion, humility, authenticity and empowerment were common themes. In Figure 3, these values and qualities are expanded on.

Figure 3: Expert Interviews Shared Values

Compassion	Humility	Authenticity	Empowerment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Listen to everyone, even when you are uncomfortable •Be patient with others as they understand themselves and the world around them. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Understand how power & privilege manifest in situations •Work to understand what you do not know 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Reflect on who you are and how you came to be •Share your story •Lean into tension •Take feedback honestly & seriously 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Check in with those most targeted in unjust situations to restore power. •Create spaces for people to share

Survey Distribution

The survey was created with Google Forms. Distribution was through email to youth development organizations including Boys & Girls Clubs of San Francisco, KIPP SF College Prep as well as asking these youth developers to share the survey link on to other youth developers in their network. The survey link was also posted on the researcher's personal social media.

Survey Design: Through the literature review, it was revealed that the first step to dismantling the White Savior Complex is to first understand one's own identity. The next step is to have an understanding of how one's identity impacts their relationships with others, especially those who

identify differently. Keeping this research in mind, questions asked on the survey were in three different categories: (1) Collect information on the participant's own identity (2) Identify the perception of how identity impacts youth work (3) Gather data on frequency of conversations about identity. Responses were almost entirely closed choice and Likert scale with the exception of the final open-ended question. There were 35 respondents to the "Identity Development in Youth Workers" survey.

Analysis of Survey Findings

Participants' identity statistics:

- 50% were 25-34 years old, 25% were 18-24 years old, 25% were 35+ years old
- 80% were identified as female, 20% identified as male
- 82% identified as heterosexual and 18% identified otherwise
- 65% identified as white and 35% identified as a person of color
- 60% work directly with youth, 40% were in a management or administrative role

The results show that most respondents who participated in the survey have an internal understanding of their identity with almost 60% of respondents acknowledging personal research on their own identity. In addition, around 80% attended at least one workshop on identity development. Many respondents also had an understanding of how their identity has an impact on their work with youth. Around 93% of respondents answered that they frequently think about how their identity impacts the work they do with youth. However, even with the majority of participants having an internal understanding, the survey results show these conversations about identity are not happening consistently with co-workers. In meetings with supervisors, 68% of respondents reported they rarely or never talk about how their personal identity affects their

work. Furthermore, 60% say they rarely or never talk about how identity affects their work within their staff teams.

Overall, the small sample of survey respondents indicate they have an internal understanding of identity but conversations regarding identity are being had infrequently with co-workers and managers.

Section 5: Implications and Recommendations

Through the literature review, expert interviews and survey results, many layers were uncovered on how the White Savior Complex manifests itself, as well as ways in which to change its discourse. In order to create meaningful connections between individuals from privileged and underserved communities, the recommendations begin with working at an organizational level. In order to accomplish these connections in a sustainable and authentic way, an organization must tackle these pervasive and usually unconscious biases from many angles. The recommendation includes an organizational overview to incorporate an understanding of identity within organizational culture and professional development, while holding four values at the core. These values were pulled from consistent themes in the literature, expert interviews and survey results.

- **Compassion:** To work to understand and respect others life experiences.
- **Authenticity:** To show up genuine, real and open.
- **Humility:** To put aside ego and accept feedback.

- **Empowerment:** To lift up those around you, especially those from marginalized communities.

The following sections contain recommendations for organizations to help them reflect on their culture and systems (Figure 2). Organizations may use the questions below to provoke discussion amongst all levels of staff.

Figure 2: Recommended Organizational Change Practices



Source: Author’s Creation, 2018

Organizational Recommendations

Organization Philosophy and System Development: An organization must look at their core values and beliefs before tackling the individual reflection. To create a truly inclusive space, the organization must ask themselves many questions and be prepared to answer authentically. First, an organization must set their value philosophy. What are the values of the organization? Are these values the same for leadership, direct staff, and all departments in the organization? Do these values also represent the communities being served? What factors motivate these values? How are these values being systemized in the organization? Are the people involved in these conversations coming from a diverse range of backgrounds? Does everyone have an understanding of how their identity impacts how they view the world and their relationships? Has the organization set up a space for people to feel truly open to share their views without fear of being retaliated against? Are those in the room who are a part of the historically dominant culture, making a consistent and humbling effort to include voices who have been in the historically subordinate culture? If a specific identity is not present at the table, is the organization taking into consideration how these systems and values would affect them? Is the organization working to ask questions that highlight perceived gaps? This process can be long and intricate, however with full and open collaboration, there is space for a system that is truly inclusive.

Hiring Practices: When interviewing, those overseeing hiring should make an effort to be aware of candidate's ability to recognize their own identity. In addition, candidates should be asked

about social justice concepts that affect the issues that drive the organization's mission. While a deep understanding of one's personal identity is a strong quality in a candidate, it does not need to be an automatic deterrent if it is not present. If they do not, it is the job of the organization to generate this area of growth within them. In the onboarding process, the organization should work to incorporate ways in which the individual will explore identity.

Ongoing Experiential Professional Development: In addition to role specific skills that are needed to achieve success in one's role, the organization should provide ongoing professional development trainings. These trainings should involve an exploration of one's personal identity and an effort to understand social justice within the community they are working. These trainings should include employees from all departments and be led in an experiential manner by an outside consultant. Enlisting a trained facilitator is imperative for these trainings. Identity workshops can become vulnerable spaces and in order for them to remain safe, the facilitator must be trained accordingly.

Coaching, Reflection & Problem Solving: These values and training procedures should not just live on the website or training, but in daily life. Questions to consider for an organization to keep equity alive in each day include: How is identity being centered when talking about personal and professional development? How are the identity dynamics being acknowledged and improved in working relationships? How are power dynamics discussed within organizational hierarchy? How can an organization be held accountable to their values? When people feel an injustice, what is the process for them to constructively vocalize without fear of retaliation? Are those who

are a part of historically dominant culture, making a consistent and humbling effort to listen and engage voices of those in subordinate culture?

If an organization creates the time to authentically discuss these questions, they will be on the path to creating long lasting change, rooted in justice.

Section 6: Conclusions

The White Savior Complex is rooted in centuries of injustices. Concepts including privilege, socialization, and identity development give explanation to an individual's view of themselves, and in turn, view of others. As the nonprofit sector continues to connect individuals from privileged and marginalized communities, it is imperative for organizations to take an honest look at how to incorporate values that build compassion, authenticity, humility and empowerment into their organization. Moving forward, more in-depth research needs to be done into the organizational change practices with a focus on creating tools to measure individual's perception of their organization's awareness around identity. In order to make a lasting successful impact in education and in the nonprofit sector, leaders must be willing to create spaces that allow individuals to reflect, listen, and empower others, especially those from marginalized communities.

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Appendix: Summary of Expert Interviews**How the white savior complex shows up in youth work and nonprofits:**

Kumar: White people feel affirmed in their existence and identity because of the world they see around them through movies, food served at restaurants, and the world around them. Then white people are coming into communities of color and teaching others how to be successful based on a white standard.

Gutierrez: Within development, people can associate money with power and can overly highlight the hero mentality when working to capture donors. Examples can be seen in fundraising events, where many times those who are “receiving” the financial benefit are expected to perform and show immense gratitude for those who are supplying the money.

Clark: Educators are not expected to have understanding of their identity. They want to do good but tend to work in systems that can perpetuate inequalities. Programs like *Teach for America* create systems for mainly young, white, people of privilege to exercise a feeling of authority while practicing in systems that can handle discipline without creating meaningful relationships. And then educators burn out because they think the youth they are working with are pushing back and they cannot reach them. But what is really happening, is the educator isn't being authentic in themselves or building authentic relationships with their co-workers and youth. They are looking at the role from a space of white dominance that may have never been challenged before. The educator doesn't even realize what is being pushed on is their own privilege.

Chen: People do not see social justice and identity development as part of the foundation of being an educator. I teach a social justice course to undergrads in a school of education at a large state university. Until recently, this class was an elective for those studying to be in the education field. The university changed the requirements to mandate the course recently because there was a consensus that social justice concepts are integral to everyone, especially those in a role of authority as an educator.

Best practices in social justice training:

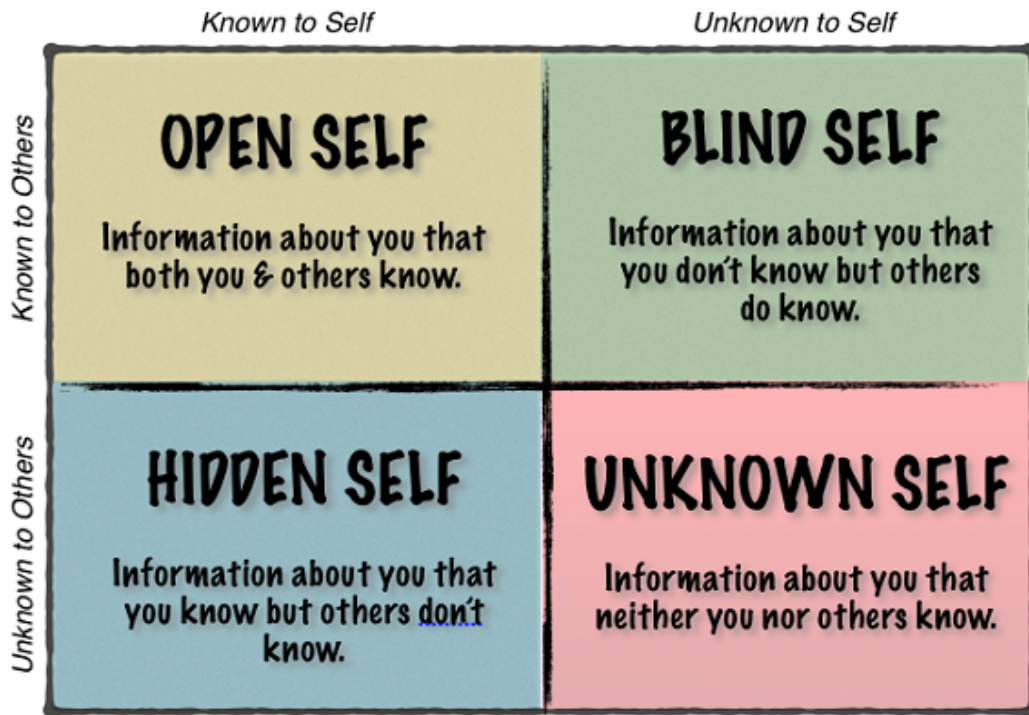
Clark: The norms are about naming that this process is going to make people uncomfortable and everyone's understanding of these concepts are rooted in their different lived experiences. As a facilitator, work to create an understanding that everyone here is coming from a good place with the best of intentions. And in this work, we are going to hear things and feel defensive. A strong facilitator works to not let the defensiveness take over. White people are going to be tripping especially white people who come from economic and social privilege, because they start feeling attacked. And the people of color are going to be triggered by white offensiveness. You have to unpack these concepts in a way that makes everyone feel safe and validated but some of it just needs to happen. And shock is a form of recognition to what's happening. It is also important, as a facilitator, to tell your own story to order to share and set a tone. The first step is to break down the layers of identity and get people to take an honest deep dive and look at their own identities and how the intersection affects them. People need to unpack themselves before there is space for reflection and feedback. Doing identity work can reveal core truths that are uncomfortable.

People are going to feel defensive or upset especially if they are unaware how the aspects of their identity has impacted their life. When introducing this concept, I like to introduce the importance of affinity groups, which is a group of people linked by a common purpose. In regards to identity these are categories like gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, socioeconomic status and more. Getting people into affinity groups helps unpack what their identity means. Answering guided questions within these different groups may help people recognize and see things they may not have seen or understood on their own. People also share different things with different affinity groups and giving space in multiple affinity groups can allow people to connect different parts of their identity.

Chen: In training, we have to get past the surface level understanding of these concepts. When we just try to be nice and not get to the deeper systems, then we stay in the savior complex. Then we aren't practice justice. Social Justice Education must be slowed down. Progress and growth must build on these concepts to be understood. When we repeat things, it makes our thinking go deeper. We have to unpack the layers of our stories then relate them to how we interact with others. When something is good, you don't say 'Oh good, I did that once, that is enough.' You think, 'How do I do that again?' Unpacking these social justice concepts is the same. It must be repeated. We must continue to see the individual in these situations and how we relate to each other. A best practice is to always start with check-ins on how people are doing and end with appreciations. These are practices are essential to keep the group understanding of themselves and those around them.

As facilitators, we also must create a space of constant learning. We must constantly be open to what we don't know. Johari's window is a great example of this how to illustrate these blind spots in ourselves.

Figure 3: Johari's Window



Source: <https://www.quora.com/What-is-the-Johari-Window-and-how-to-use-it>

Kumar: When unpacking these difficult concepts, the facilitator should understand that people will be coming into spaces with many of their own preconceived ideas. The training must follow a path of unlearning, opening, relearning and practice. And to first unlearn, people have to be seen, supported and validated in the space. If they don't feel supported, then they will close

down. Next, we must name identity, celebrate identity, name difference, celebrate difference.

Finally, we must understand how to constantly be working through our differences. A team must be able to lean into this tension as way to leverage the difference to be stronger because of it. For a team to truly work together, they must be able to systemize and build on these differences as strengths, not in trying to make everyone the same.

Tools & best practices in daily work:

Erin: Hire more people from the community that is being served in order to allow them to set the tone for how the organization will work to solve problems within the community. Also, find a person who has an understanding of both the privileged and marginalized community in order for them to bridge and explain each community's values.

Clark: Incorporating social justice concepts into coaching and management of staff. To do this, the managers must have their own deep understanding. When people do not see these concepts as part of their work, the cycle of injustice continues. When we work with humans, we must have an understanding of humanity. We have to be able to put the book aside when what you see happening is the heart. When we see that a human need to be heard, it is our job to acknowledge their humanity.

Kumar: Engage in a thought partnership with who you serve or are working with. If a teacher or someone in authority is having a problem, include those who they are struggling in the problem-solving conversation. When you come to someone saying 'I'm struggling with this, can you help me?' It comes from a real place and shows the humility. This breaks down the white

savior complex. It shows an understanding that you know you do not have the answers and want to create a partnership of shared ideas.

Chen: When we witness an aggression take place, it is best to check in with the one who has been targeted or affected. To approach and say ‘Are you OK? How can I support you right now?’ gives the person who was impacted a choice on how to be supported. If we see an aggression and come in and start calling out the aggressor and telling them what they are did wrong in front of the targeted, it can continue to rob the target of power and choice in that situation. To come in a take over the situation can continue to perpetuate the problem.

Mercedes Reed's Bio

 www.linkedin.com/in/mercedes-reed-2148ab97/

Currently as the Assistant Camp Director for Camp Mendocino at Boys & Girls Club of San Francisco (BGCSF), Mercedes works to develop programs that create community and experiences can improve youth and young adults in a way that they can take their lessons from into their everyday lives. Her expertise lies in youth and staff development, program development and implementation and community collaboration.

Mercedes grew up in a variety of recreational settings in the Midwest and began her professional career in job readiness programs that these programs offered. When attending University of Wisconsin-Madison for undergrad, she became involved in a student organization called ALPs (Adventure Learning Programs) and learned the theory behind experiential education while honing her skills as a facilitator, social justice advocate and ropes course manager. After undergrad, she served as an AmeriCorps VISTA for a year supporting a service learning program at UW-Madison for after-school science clubs. As an AmeriCorps VISTA, Mercedes learned about the sustainable program development and how to impact a community through accompaniment. After a year of service, she worked at a small, youth nonprofit called Red Caboose as a Site Supervisor for an after-school program and day camp for K-5 graders for four years. This role taught her how to be a manager that enhances others while creating a team that is cohesive and impactful. In January of 2014, she moved out to San Francisco and started her position at Boys & Girls Club of San Francisco (BGCSF) as the Site Director for extracurricular programming during the founding year at KIPP San Francisco College Preparatory. Working to build a founding program was the biggest professional challenge yet, but it gave first-hand experience in community partnerships and strategic planning. After building a program, she took advantage of going back to her roots in summer camp and moved into the Assistant Camp Director for Programs at Camp Mendocino through BGCSF.