“I’M JUST AMERICAN”: FACILITATING SEMINARY STUDENTS’ REFLECTIONS ON HOW WHITENESS IMPACTS THEIR VOCATIONAL FORMATION

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Abstract

While there is substantial literature published in the USA discussing racial identity development and literature discussing vocational formation, there is little scholarly work that explores the intersection between racial/ethnic identity and vocational formation. Nor is there work that focuses on the impact of Whiteness on vocational formation for European Americans. This paper explores the intersection between White identity and vocation formation with particular attention to the implications for practice in a seminary classroom.

Introduction

Several years ago, I took my first steps in the practice of facilitating conversations around race and ethnicity. I had students complete an ethnic autobiography.[1] As we talked about the experience of the exercise, one student identified as Mexican-American and reflected on the stories he heard about his great-grandparents. Another student talked about his German heritage, also noting it was his great-grandparents who emigrated to the United States. “But,” he said, “I don’t see myself as German-American. I’m ‘just American.’”

I was troubled by the phrase “just American.” However, at that point in time I lacked the skill to expose the assumptions that came with it. Despite having a PhD in Intercultural Studies and despite having the enriching experience of learning along side people from many different nations, I had not yet grappled meaningfully with my identity as a White person. I was not conversant with the idea of “white privilege” and I was not familiar with the concept of “white normativity.” I had some measure of cultural awareness from my life experience as a missionary kid and cross-cultural mission worker but I was just beginning the journey of exploring racial identity.

Between that time and now, I have learned more about racial identity and have thought about its impact on vocation. I have had more experiences facilitating conversations around race and ethnicity with seminary students. I still consider myself a novice in this area of endeavor but at least I have acquired a sense of how much I have to learn. This paper represents my current thoughts on the relationship between racial identity—specifically, White identity—and vocational formation as well as articulating some of what I have learned through facilitating conversations on this subject.[2]

European American seminary students have rarely considered how Whiteness has shaped their understanding of leadership or their understanding of the nature of vocational formation. This is often true even for Whites who desire to be allies with people of color around issues of ethnicity, race, and justice. Literature on social justice activism rarely addresses the vocational formation of the individuals and communities involved in this work. Literature on vocational formation rarely acknowledges the impact of a person’s context and racial/ethnic identity on that formation. This

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[1] The exercise “Writing an Ethnic Autobiography” comes from Mark Lau Branson, and Juan F. Martinez, *Churches, Cultures and Leadership: a Practical Theology of Congregations and Ethnicities*. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 24-25. The list of questions in this exercise can be found in an appendix at the end of this paper.

[2] This paper consciously centers on the experience of Whiteness. The risk of doing so is to contribute to, rather than ameliorate, the cost of the centrality of Whiteness for the broader community. The intention of this paper is to grapple with one element of the conversation that only White people can do: face, scrutinize, and address the fact of our Whiteness and its implications. This paper represents one effort to engage in this work for the sake of taking one step closer to a Revelation 7 Church in which peoples of all ethnicities, races, and cultures stand before God in their rich diversity.

paper suggests racial/ethnic identity, context, and vocational formation are inextricably linked, and explores means by which leader formation practitioners may assist seminary students in becoming aware of this connection and its impact on their vocational identity.

Through the paper, I focus on classroom interactions as the context of conversation.[3] I use two students, "Joe" and "Lily,"[4] to represent some of the dynamics that I commonly encounter with White students in a class I teach on Vocational Formation.[5] I begin with the starting point I still use —an ethnic autobiography—and identify two problems that unexamined White identity poses for vocational formation. I then discuss how Whiteness impacts several elements of a common cultural model of vocation formation. Finally, I conclude with recommendations for development focusing especially on the development of the educator engaged in this work.

Ethnic Autobiography and Vocation—A Starting Point

Joe is from a mainline denominational church in a mostly White suburb of a major city in the North-West part of the United States. Joe is in seminary working on a Master of Divinity degree, exploring the possibility of ordination in this denomination. Joe desires to identify himself as a racial ally. Aware of urban church planting initiatives in his tradition, Joe envisions himself potentially leading a multi-ethnic ministry.

Lily grew up in a staunchly Evangelical church located in a small town just outside of a major mid-Western city. Lily's involvement in a Christian student group on her college campus was deeply impactful as she interacted regularly with people who were not White for the first time in her life. After working for a couple years on staff in that ministry, Lily started a seminary degree to receive further training.

In a course on Vocational Formation, Joe and Lily complete an ethnic autobiography.[6] In addition to the questions asked about their ethnic identity, Joe and Lily are also asked to reflect on the following questions: 1) How has your ethnic identity and racial identity impacted your understanding of the nature of vocation? and 2) How have the assumptions and values within your ethnic/racial context shaped what you believe is possible for you vocationally?

Joe writes about his Scotts-Irish background and his experience growing up in a majority White area with progressive-leaning politics. Joe asserts that a person's ethnic or racial identity shouldn't have an impact on what that person pursues vocationally, but acknowledges that there are some people who are limited by their race. "Everyone should have a chance to live out the American Dream," Joe writes, "no matter where they come from or what their ethnicity."

Lily writes "I definitely feel that I've had a white suburban understanding of vocation, where taking care of your family and living out your 'individual relationship with God' is everything." When pressed to think about how being White has impacted her formation, Lily says she believes

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[3] I work with emerging and developing leaders in a seminary context. Although the focus of this paper is the process that takes place in a classroom, similar learning experiences occur on a Sunday morning and in the board room and in team meetings. My hope is that in focusing on a particular context, the principles become clear and can then be adapted and addressed in other contexts and areas of practice.

[4] "Joe" and "Lily" are representations of two particular groups of students I encounter often in my classes. The outlines of their stories based on actual students. The words in quotes are drawn from students' written work.

[5] IS500 Practices of Vocational formation is one of four integrative courses required for almost all Masters students at Fuller Theological Seminary. This course has been in existence since Fall 2014 and the author has been teaching IS500 since Fall 2015.

[6] Branson and Martinez, 24-25.

her family originally was English but that she doesn't think of herself as being a member of a racial group. "I'm just normal," she says.

An ethnic autobiography is a starting point for personal reflection. Both Joe and Lily are able to identify their ethnic origins and reflect on family stories. At the same time, both struggle to articulate how being White has shaped their experience.[7] Neither has a conscious sense of racial identity and both demonstrate some level of discomfort with being identified as "White". This trait is common among White students in seminary: most have not had to think about themselves as having a racial identity. As a result, they struggle to recognize particular ways their experience of Whiteness has impacted their assumptions about and experience of vocational formation.

For Joe and Lily, and other seminary students seeking to develop in their capacity to engage with God's work in the world, an unexamined experience of Whiteness has detrimental impact on their development in two primary ways. First, being unaware of White racial identity means the person neither recognizes they ways in which they have experienced the benefits of Whiteness nor do they recognized the ways in which the values, assumptions and behaviors of Whiteness contradict and hinder God's work. Second, insofar as the White person is unaware of their racial identity, they will act out of their White privilege, assuming White normativity, and tacitly supporting structural racism even when they desire to be engaged in a life-giving way in issues of justice and racial reconciliation. "Until we know who we are ethnically, we are unable to really reconcile genuinely with others," Brenda Salter McNeil writes. "And until we know and recognize people for who they really are—including some of their history as a people—and then interact with them in ways that actually influence how we see ourselves, we cannot genuinely reconcile with them."[8]

Racial Identity Formation and Mental Models of Race

The term "White"[9] refers to people identified by society as having the physical phenotype characteristics of a person of European descent. "Whiteness" then is the corresponding social construct related to the identity, values, and behaviors associated with people who are categorized as "White."[10]

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[7] Use of "ethnicity" in Branson & Martinez's exercise can connect positively in comparison to the more triggering term "race." On the other hand, use of this term allows a White student able to affirm their ethnic background—German, Italian, Irish, etc.—and ignore the fact they live as White people in a radicalized world.

[8] Brenda Salter McNeil and Rick Richardson, *The Heart of Racial Justice: How Soul Change Leads to Social Change*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 88.

[9] In this paper I chose to capitalize "White" to parallel other terms of racial and ethnic designation that are always capitalized such as African American or Asian American. I chose not to use the term "European American" in this context because it implies an emphasis on ethnicity that obscures the challenges that come with forming a healthy White racial identity. I capitalize "Whiteness" both for its parallel to the racial term White and to emphasize the nature of Whiteness as more than an individual's self-identity.

[10] DiAngelo defines Whiteness as "dynamic, relational, and operating at all times and on myriad levels" and including "processes and practices include basic rights, values, beliefs, perspectives and experiences purported to be commonly shared by all but which are actually only consistently afforded to white people." Robin DiAngelo, "White fragility." *The International Journal of Critical Pedagogy* 3, no. 3 (2011), 56.

The concept of "race"[11] in general and the specific racial designation "White" are socially constructed conceptualizations.[12] The modern concept of race has its origins in the Enlightenment with the development of a "scientific" race theory utilized to justify enslaving whole people groups.[13] While 21st century genetics and biological science has demonstrated that this conceptualization of "race" has no biological basis yet, in the context of 21st century racialized society in the United States,[14] the concept persists and continues to be a basis for social organization and interaction throughout the nation. The social significance of these concepts is guided by the social meanings ascribed to them. "As social facts, both 'race' and whiteness define real situations in American society; and, as real situations, both 'race' and whiteness issue into real social consequences."[15]

Psychologist Beverly Daniel Tatum writes about "racial-ethnic-cultural identity development"[16] from adolescence to adulthood. She defines this development as "the process of defining for oneself the personal significance and social meaning of belonging to a particular racial group."[17] Tatum observes, "There is a lot of silence about race in White communities, and as a consequences Whites tend to think of racial identity as something that other people have, not

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[11] Omi and Winant observe the concept of "race" is often viewed as a social category that is either an objective reality or an ideological construct. "When view as an object matter, race is usually understood as rooted in biological differences, ranging from such familiar phonemic markers as skin color, hair texture, or eye shape, to more obscure human variations occurring at the genetic or genomic levels." When viewed as an ideological construct, on the other hand, race is seen as a concept that "masks a more fundamental material distinction" such as ethnicity, class or nation. Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*. (New York: Routledge, 2014), 109.

[12] The concept of "socially constructed knowledge" is a theory of knowledge developed in sociology and communications theory that looks at how humans rationalize their experience and codify that rationalization in language. This is similar to the concept of "mental models" in leadership theory, popularized by the work of Peter Senge who defines mental models as those "deeply held internal images of how the world works, images the limit us to familiar ways of thinking and acting." Peter M. Senge, *The fifth discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization*. (Broadway Business, 2006) , 163. Cognitive anthropologists work with "cognitive schemas," a "learned, internalized pattern of thought-feeling" (Strauss 1992, 3) which has been "built up from experience and stored in memory" (Quinn 2005b, 38). All three disciplines are dealing with ways in which experience shapes conceptual frameworks which, in turn, govern the interpretation of further experience. The Implicit Associations Test (IAT) is a tool within social psychology designed to measure the strength of of a person's automatic association between objects in memory. To explore the IAT, visit https://implicit.harvard.edu/.

[13] Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America*. (Oxford University Press, USA, 2001), 8.

[14] Emerson and Smith define a "racialized society" as "a society wherein race matters profoundly for differences in life experiences, life opportunities, and social relationships." Emerson and Smith, 7.

[15] Guess, Teresa J. "The social construction of whiteness: Racism by intent, racism by consequence." *Critical Sociology* 32, no. 4 (2006): 656.

[16] Beverly Daniel Tatum, *Why are all the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?: And Other Conversations About Race,* (New York: Basic Books, 2017), 134.

[17] Tatum, 96.

something that is salient for them."[18] She further notes, "For White people living in largely White environments, it is possible to live one's entire life without giving focused attention to what it means to be White. Ethnic identity (being of Irish, Italian, Polish ancestry, for example) may be celebrated as part of a family's culture traditions, but being White may go unexplored because it just seems 'normal.'"[19]

This dynamic is clear in the responses Lily and Joe have to the ethic autobiography exercise. They are able to identify their ethnic background but not articulate what being White means for them personally. When asked to reflect on how race impacts vocational formation, instead of talking about the meaning of being White, they "otherize" the subject by focusing on people of color.

Richard Dyer observes, "As long as race is something only applied to non-white peoples, as long as white people are not racially seen and named, they/we function as a human norm. Other people are raced, we are just people."[20] Dyer further notes, "There is no more powerful position than that of being 'just' human. The claim to power is the claim to speak for the commonality of humanity. Raced people can't do that—they only speak for their own race."[21]

Neither Joe nor Lily feels powerful when it comes to issues of race. And neither feels comfortable with the idea that they daily experience the benefits of being White. However, by naming their own experience "normal," they end up unable to see the experience of others as being fully human as well.[22] This hinders their capacity to truly hear the experiences of others and to accurately see the impact they have in their social environment.

Whiteness and a Theology of Vocational Formation

How then does this unarticulated White identity and the values and assumptions inherent in Whiteness impact understanding of vocational formation? In the class, I define "vocation" as participation in God's work in the world and "vocational formation" as the process of developing and sustaining that participation. Based on observations of students and reflecting on literature around White identity formation, several elements of vocational formation stand out.

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[18] Tatum, 186. In this paper, the focus is the impact of that silence on White people. Meanwhile, White silence has profound impact on the experience of people of color. This is part of the unrealized and unintended impact for the broader community of ignoring White identity development. The impact of Whiteness on people of color and the impact of faculty Whiteness of their students of color is a subject needing attention; it is, nevertheless, beyond the scope of the present paper.

[19] Tatum, 189.

[20] Richard Dyer "The Need to Understand Whiteness" in *Race, Ethnicity, and Gender: Selected Readings,* eds. Joseph F. Healey and Eileen O'Brien, (Pine Forge Press, 2007), 407. Michael Morris explains the concept of "white normativity" in this way, "white people are people, and the members of other racial groups are people to the extent they resemble white people….White normativity functions to make whites 'standard' or 'typical' but not always explicitly superior." Michael Morris, Michael. "Standard White: Dismantling White Normativity." *California Law Review* 104(4)(2016): 952.

[21] Dyer, 407.

[22] Dyer continues in his discussion, writing, "As long as whiteness is felt to be the human condition, then it alone defines normality….[The] equation of being white with being human secures a position of power. White people have power and believe that they think, feel, and act like and for all people; white people, unable to see their particularity, cannot take account of other people's [particularity]. White power…reproduces itself…overwhelmingly because it is not seen as whiteness but as normal." Dyer, 407-408.

Individualism

In Geert Hofstede's study of many nations, the United States ranks the highest in the world on the individualism side of the individualism/collectivism scale.[23] A healthy member of an individualistic society is expected to stand on his or her own feet, and take care of themselves and their immediate family. Children in individualistic families grow up to think about themselves as "I" rather than as a member of a "we." The assumption is that the individual charts the course of their own life and is responsible for the success or failure in their lives. When people in an individualistic context think about a job, they place high priority on personal freedom and challenging, personally fulfilling work. In an individualistic context, the cultural value is to view people primarily on the basis of who they are as individuals and not any group affiliation.[24]

USAmerican students generally engage the question of vocational formation from this individualistic perspective. Students ask questions such as, "What am *I* do do? What is *my* ministry? What role has God called *me* to engage?" Even in theological environments that include group discernment as an important part of the process—call discernment committees and the like—the vocation being discerned is still that of the individual.[25] The group can contribute to the process by means of counsel and prayer, but, ultimately, it is up to the individual to know and live out their vocation.

Lily and Joe demonstrate individualistic assumptions. Joe is exploring the possibility of ordination and expects the course will help him discern the direction of his life. Lily wants training that will help her develop personal skills in youth ministry. Both are attending seminary, pursuing their individual development.

But individualism goes deeper than the assumption that vocation is about an individual's personal development. Individualism impacts how racial identity is seen to affect vocational formation or, to be more accurate, how difficult it is for White students to see how race affects vocational formation. White students resist being viewed as a member of a group, wanting instead to be seen as individuals. Individualism "allows whites to distance themselves from their racial group and demand to be granted the benefit of the doubt, as individuals, in all cases."[26]

Yet "thinking of oneself only as an individual" is itself "a legacy of White privilege."[27] The concept of "White privilege"—an invisible package of unearned assets granted based on the

[23] Geert Hofstede and Gert Jan Hofstede, *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*, (New York: McGraw Hill, 2005), 78.

[24] Hofstede and Hofstede, 98.

[25] For example, see Tod Bolsinger, "Formed, Not Found" *Fuller Magazine* 1, 46-49. Bolsinger states, "The formation of vocation is from start to finish a *communal* event that is both contextual and incarnational." The biblical examples that follow emphasize community as the context. Bolsinger further writes, "The vocation of God is a gift of grace mediated through the relationship and formation of the people of God. The call comes within and through the community." Thus, the community is the *context* of formation but the vocation is not the community's; the vocation is the *individual's* vocation.

[26] DiAngelo, 59.

[27] Tatum, 196.

perception of a person's racial identity[28]—is particularly troubling to White students. Students may respond with angry defensiveness when they are "accused" of receiving unearned benefits based on race.[29]

Joe and Lily both resist the idea of White privilege, although for different reasons. Joe expects his self-identification as a racial ally to be accepted on the basis of his individual good intentions.[30] Meanwhile, Joe is oblivious to the ways he tacitly enacts racism, including the fact he interrupts students of color to insist on his ally identity. Lily, on the other hand, says nothing in class discussion, but struggles profoundly with the idea of being identified as a member of a group. She believes, as many White Evangelicals do, in "accountable freewill individualism"[31]—the belief that every person is individually responsible for his or her choices and that the life experiences of an individual are the result of those choices. Neither Joe nor Lily accept that even if they don't think of themselves as "White," society does and treats them accordingly.[32]

Emphasis on Task or Role

A common Christian understanding of vocation in the USA is that vocation is about an individual's knowledge of their God-given role or occupation.[33] The term "vocation" tends to trigger the broader social construct of job or career. Even viewed in theological terms, recognizing that the Latin word *vocare* means "to call," vocation is still thought of in terms of an occupation. Most students react negatively at the idea that a vocation is *only* a job; nevertheless, they expect a person is called to a particular career.

Furthermore, the greater the social status of a role, the more likely it is to be viewed as a "calling."[34] In some theological environments, calling is limited to the role of pastor or missionary.[35] In other environments, a broader range of occupations are considered possible locations of vocation.[36] Helping professions such as doctor, fire fighter or police officer are more likely to be viewed as callings along with "white collar" roles such as accountant or chief executive and roles

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[28] Peggy McIntosh likens the benefits of Whiteness to "an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools and blank checks" and observes that White people are not taught to recognize the presence of privilege at work in their lives. Peggy McIntosh, "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack" in *Revisioning Family Therapy: Race, Culture and Gender in Clinical Practice*, (New York, The Guildford Press, 1988), 148.

[29] DiAngelo, 60.

[30] DiAngelo would suggest Joe is here demonstrating "white fragility" in that he resists the feedback that his behavior has racist impact, a challenge that is particularly troubling for political and theological progressives. DiAngelo, 57.

[31] Emerson and Smith, 76-77.

[32] Tatum, 198.

[33] Susan L. Maros, "Knowing my call: A cultural model of the experience of call in a Pentecostal/charismatic context." (Fuller Theological Seminary, School of Intercultural Studies, 2014), 122.

[34] Maros, 106.

[35] See, for example, Terry L. Cross, *Answering the Call in the Spirit: Pentecostal Reflections on a Theology of Vocation, Work and Life*, (Lee University Press, 2007), 33.

[36] Cite…? One of the Reformed folk on vocation…

that require education such as astronomer or psychologist. Roles such as janitor or assembly line worker are less likely to be viewed as valid vocations.

Note the normative White, middle class social values present in the assessment of various roles. Authority, financial status, and education are highly prized. The fact that some people have greater access to finances, education, or social status as a result of their racial or ethnic identity is ignored.[37] The unconscious bias of associating particular roles with vocation and associating particular races with those roles impacts the vocational formation of many.

Emphasis on Gifts and Passions

Students tend to see vocational formation as being related to an individual's passions, gifts, and personality. This is a way of looking at vocation through a "self-actualization" frame: focusing on an individual's sense of satisfaction in making a contribution to the community.[38] The fact of the inherent socioeconomic privilege this view necessitates is absent from consideration. The message "you can be anything you set your mind to" is a message given to Whites, a message of privilege and position, of all possibilities open. This message shapes the way a White person thinks about vocation. Vocation is expected to be challenging and personally fulfilling, meaningful for the individual.

Instead of challenging self-fulfillment orientated cultural understanding of vocation, White Christians can end up bearing a heavy burden. If the responsibility is for them to individually identify their calling and that calling is supposed to be full of joy, failing to identify calling is assumed to mean life will have little meaning or value. Lily reflects this experience, writing, "The mindset of the rugged individual characteristic of white American values manifested in my understanding of vocation as something I realize and execute entirely on my own. This placed an intense amount of pressure on me in college in that I expected my individual work to give me full meaning and satisfaction in life and be the primary place where I lived out my faith." This vocational burden is one created by Whiteness, not required by Scripture.

(Cis)Gendered Expectations

Vocations are gendered. Some roles are consciously and unconsciously associated with men while others are associated with women. For example, in certain conservative Christian circles, a woman articulating her sense of "calling" to be an at-home wife and mother will be affirmed but a man articulating sense of "calling" to be an at-home husband and father would not be affirmed as valid. Even in more progressive theological contexts where gender roles are not as clearly defined in traditional terms, men and women are often still expected to adhere to cisgendered norms.

Lily writes, "Growing up in church, I never thought that I could be in ministry because I was a woman." It was the woman who was the staff worker for the Christian ministry on Lily's college campus who began to suggest different expectations "Assumptions that gender limits leadership capabilities kept my view of vocation small, but it has expanded and is continuing to expand."

Note, however, that Lily writes as a White woman. Her conservative, White, middle class social norms have her choosing between the role of wife and mother and the role of working in a context outside of the home. Women of color, particularly Black women in the United States, have

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[37] For one discussion of socio-economic disparities, see Emerson and Smith, 11-18.

[38] Maros, 49-50.

always worked outside the home.[39] What is framed as a gender norm issue is really a racially located gender norm.

Joe, too, labors under White gender norms. He knows his parents expect him to marry and have children, and to have a career that will financially support his family. Being a "good Christian man" means providing financially for your family.

Success as Evaluative Criteria

In both conservative and progressive theological circles, a person's "success" in their calling is very often assessed based on metrics—the so-called "A, B, Cs" of ministry: attendance, buildings and cash. In this way vocational formation is evaluated by means of capitalistic and materialistic criteria. Joe reflects this perspective when he writes, "I have often felt a lot of pressure in relation to my vocation. Whatever I end up doing, I feel a pressure that I must be super successful; I can't settle for something small." This approach to vocation that is focused on production flies in the face of biblical statements such as the value of laying one's life down (John 15:13) or being the servant of all (Matthew 33:11) or being known by the love demonstrated in the community (John 13:35), to name a few.

Additionally, this evaluation by metrics reflects a key cultural assumption in the United States: the belief that anyone can be and do anything they set their mind to as long as they work hard enough. One study found that a "dearly held assumption for a large majority of white evangelicals is that all Americans have equal opportunity."[40] Thus, if a person fails to achieve "success" in their vocation, as measured by material metrics, the fault lies with the individual.[41] This ignores the ways in which structural racism plays a role in a person achieving financial and social status. Personal achievement and self-sufficiency are central to a White sensibility. To acknowledge access to resources is unequal between racial groups is to challenge the culturally central myth of meritocracy.[42]

Concrete Steps

Given these dynamics are present in a seminary classroom, what then are some resources or strategies for assisting White students in thinking about the impact of Whiteness on their expectations of and experience with vocational formation? I offer the following to my colleagues as some suggestions for engagement.[43]

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[39] This is the heart of the difference between feminism and womanism in the United States. The former has been criticized as being dominantly led by middle class White women and ignoring the concerns of women of color. Note also that womanist writers and thinkers generally address community concerns while feminists focus on the concerns and rights of individual women.

[40] Emerson and Smith, 98.

[41] See Emerson and Smith, 98-106, for an articulation of White evangelical perspectives contrasted with Black evangelical perspectives on the source of socio-economic inequalities in the United States.

[42] DiAngelo, 57.

[43] These recommendations presume an educator working in a classroom though I hope they might be helpful for colleagues who are engaged in non-formal and informal learning experiences as well.

Begin with Listening

Leadership begins with listening.[44] Particularly for those of us who are White and thus embedded in a context where our racial affiliation is the norm, listening to the voices of others who have a different experience is profoundly important. Before we even think about taking action, we need to listen and listen and listen.

Listen to colleagues and students of color whenever and however they tell their stories. Listen to podcasts of people of color and read blogs of people of color. Read novels by people of color. Watch movies by and about people of color. Become educated on the history of slavery and segregation in the United States.[45] Notice your feelings and reactions. Explore the roots of those feelings. Be alert to externalizing the discomfort by blaming the "other." Facing our own mental models regarding our racial identity and telling our own stories is part of the process of decentralizing Whiteness and making space for others to tell their stories.

Explore of White Identity

Based on the principle that we cannot give what we do not have, an essential point of development for the professor is to explore his or her own racial identity. Complete the Ethnic Autobiography. Take several of the Implicit Associations Tests. Discuss the results with a trusted colleague or friend. Read *Divided By Faith* and *Why are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* Read these books together with a friend, family member, or colleague willing to explore White identity with you. Seek out workshops and seminars on White identity. Consider how your own sense of vocation was shaped by the values and assumptions of Whiteness.

Develop Resilience

Psychological discomfort with conversations about race is part of the hidden cost of racism for Whites.[46] Many Whites have so little resilience that any conversation about race provokes anger, withdrawal, and emotional incapacitation.[47] Come to grips with the fact that having conversations about the experience of race and ethnicity is going to bring passionate emotions to the surface. Get comfortable with being uncomfortable. Keep a journal. Practice good emotional hygiene. Read the stories of Whites who have engaged in issues of race.[48] Sit in the classrooms of colleagues who address issues of race.

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[45] For example, Milton C. Sernett, ed., *African American Religious History: A Documentary Witness*. (Duke University Press, 1999.), Lerone Bennett, *Before the Mayflower: A History of Black America*. (Johnson Publishing Company Incorporated, 2003), and Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. (The New Press, 2012.)

[46] Tatum, 187.

[47] DiAngelo refers to this emotional incapacity for dealing with race-based stress as "white fragility." See DiAngelo, 54-56.

[48] For example, Kendall tells the story of her journey in the first chapter of her book. Kendall, 1-18. For the story of an Evangelical White pastor developing awareness as a result of his interest in multi-ethnic ministry see Daniel Hill, *White Awake: An Honest Look at What it Means to be White*. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2017). For a sometimes painfully honest story of developing self-awareness, see Debby Irving, *Waking Up White and Finding Myself in the Story of Race*, (Cambridge, MA: Elephant Room Press, 2014).

Facilitate Conversations in Your Classroom

If conversations about race cannot be fostered in a seminary, how do we expect our students to engage in these conversations in their churches and ministry and work contexts? Few of us have much experience in facilitating these conversations. The model of educators is that we are the dispassionate experts. If we hold onto our self-identity as experts and avoid conversations where we are not, we will end up tacitly supporting systemic racism in our classrooms. We cannot get the experience of facilitating conversations any other way than facilitating conversations. Consider integrating exercises like Branson and Martinez's ethnic autobiography as a starting point for discussion. Explore case studies related to your topic that include race as a dynamic. Consider biographies as a rich resource for stories that express a wide variety of life contexts.

Examine Institutional Whiteness

Leaders in educational institutions need to explore the Whiteness of academia. Seeing academic disciplines as "neutral" is a way of undergirding Whiteness by failing to address how White normativity dominates those disciplines. Seeking to always have "dispassionate" academic discussion is a functional way of supporting Whiteness by shutting down voices that speak with passion and pain. Listen to colleagues of color without critique when they express their experiences in the institution. Read *Teaching for a Culturally Diverse and Racially Just World*.[49] Find likeminded colleagues to process with. Avoid the white privilege behavior of asking a colleague of color to be your "educator." Colleagues of color carry enough weight simply surviving in a White institution; they are not responsible to carry you also. Find White people to process Whiteness in your institution.

Commit to Engaging Scholars of Color

White normativity in academia is a self-replicating system. We read White authors and then use those same White authors in our classrooms, and then our students use those White authors in their own work. Make a commitment to read authors of color in your field. If it is hard to identify authors of color in your field, commit to keep in mind that this difficulty is an expression of systemic racism, not the absence of good scholars of color. Ask colleagues for suggestions. Scan syllabi in your institution and at other institutions for ideas. Prioritize listening to presentations by people of color at conferences you attend and pay attention to the scholars they cite. Read journals that specifically address your discipline from a non-White perspective.

Commit to include authors of color on your reading lists for every class. Start with one and grow from there every time you teach the class. Brainstorm on ways to include race and ethnicity as a thread in your subject. Avoid treating the issue as a "topic;" this tends to reinforce race as an "optional subject." Commit to reading one book or article on issues of race and ethnicity before each class you teach that incorporates this subject.

Conclusion

For Joe and for Lily, and for all the students they represent, a faithful step forward toward a more just world is to grow in awareness of their racial identity and how their Whiteness is expressed in everyday interactions with the people around them. While students are seeking vocational formation that focuses on a God-given role or occupation, engaging them in considering the impact of their racialized experience will help them grow and help them become women and men who engage with God's work in a racialized world.

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[49] Eleazar S. Fernandez, ed. *Teaching for a Culturally Diverse and Racially Just World.* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2014.)

Appendix: Branson & Martinez "Ethnic Autobiography" Questions

1. What do you know concerning the ethnicity and national origins of your parents, grandparents and earlier generations? If this is different from the heritage of the household in which you were raised, describe those differences.
2. When were you first aware of ethnic (or racial) categories? When were you first aware of persons who were different?
3. How did your parents and grandparents voice ethnic matters or convey to you what they perceived or what they thought was important? How did other members of the household contribute to your understandings about your own ethnic heritage?
4. This about phases of your life—childhood, adolescence, early adulthood, middle and perhaps later adulthood. How did your ethnic identity affect you? How has your awareness changed? What difference did it make in relationships, where you lived, what activities you participated in, how you experienced school, and how you experienced your society (city, nation)?
5. In what sense was who you in your race/ethnicity considered "normative" or in what sense was that aspect of your identity "marginalized" or "suppressed"? What do you remember about experiences of being treated unfairly because of cultural identity? Or of treating others unfairly?
6. How have you experienced significant boundary crossing (either in travel, through relationships or in some organization)? What did you learn about others and yourself?
7. What is the relationship between your ethnic identity and your faith? What difference did or does it make in church? In your beliefs or theology?
8. In what ways do the stories, values and practices of your ethnic heritage parallel the gospel or facilitate and nurture being a Christian? What elements of your ethnic heritage make being a Christian difficult?
9. What do you value most in your ethnic and/or racial heritage? What do you value least?