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Master's Project: Examining Equity and Emergence: Personal Inquiry and Practice

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EXAMINING EQUITY AND EMERGENCE:
PERSONAL INQUIRY AND PRACTICE

A Masters Project Presented

by

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to

The Faculty of the Graduate College

of

The University of Vermont

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for the Degree of Master of Science
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ABSTRACT

When I awakened to the reality of my White privilege I began a transformative learning journey which implicates my personal life, professional work, and leadership practice.

This project deepened and integrated my understanding of Whiteness, power, privilege, and systemic oppression. By learning the ways I perpetuate white supremacy, I create personal agency for changing such patterns, embodying leadership which builds a more equitable and justice-centered future. This personal inquiry utilized emergent strategy, relationship-building, and critical reflection to generate deep and integrated learning.

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INTRODUCTION

At age 29, I awakened to the reality of my White privilege. This project deepened and integrated my understanding of Whiteness, power, privilege, and systemic oppression in order to grow my personal, professional, and leadership capacities for the purpose of building a more equitable and justice-centered future. By learning the ways I perpetuate white supremacy, I create personal agency for changing such patterns so that I can embody leadership¹ that creates the conditions for all life to thrive.

Colonization, racism, and oppression founded America (Coates, 2014; Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014; Tuck, McKenzie, & McCoy, 2014; Zinn, 1999). These practices are evident throughout history up to present day (Apple, 1993; Jana, 2014; Kuwahara, 2016; Siegel-Hawley, 2013; Span, 2017; Thomas, 1984; Serrano & Nowakowski, 2018). Prior to graduate school, I had no concept of systemic racism and oppression. A course titled *Power, Privilege, and Catalyzing Change* (University of Vermont, Washington, D.C, 2017) shifted my worldview as I learned about structural pathways that provide opportunities for White people like me to remain in positions of power and authority, while limiting these for people of Color. This simple yet complex reality catalyzed the journey of understanding my own privilege and my role in a movement to realize racial equity.

The shift towards equity relies on those with power and privilege offering their power to rebalance structures of domination and oppression (Kolan, 2017)². “Eddo-

¹ I consider a leader one who creates conditions for all life to thrive by inviting multiple ways of being and knowing, rather than the person holding space and power.

² Many scholars and activists say that the work of undoing systemic oppression cannot be the work of White people without direction from People of Color. As Anspach (2017) stated: “There are plenty of problematic approaches white people can take when engaging on race..., so it's crucial for us to take leadership cues from people of color and put extra thought into our work” (n.p.).

Lodge (2017) says that “[racism] is a problem in the psyche of whiteness that white people must take responsibility to solve” (as cited in Viñas, 2017). “It is incumbent upon white people to dismantle white supremacy, black and brown people cannot do that” (Rao, as cited in Warner, 2018). I am accountable to my new knowledge.

White privilege, the preference for whiteness³, is an important element of how systems of domination and oppression persist. “In a sense, whiteness is at once the means of dominance, the end to which dominance points, and the point of dominance, too, which, in its purest form, in its greatest fantasy, never ends” (Dyson, 2018, p.ix). This privilege also often leads to “white fragility” which DiAngelo (2011) describes as immense difficulty for white people to engage in conversations about race due to “a social environment that protects and insulates them from race-based stress” (p. 54). This learned expectation of white people for racial comfort causes what DiAngelo (2011) terms “white fragility... a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves” (p. 54). Everyone loses when systems of domination and oppression persist: “When a society is entrenched with structural inequity and inhibits mechanisms to address persistent inequity, social supports for all members of that society are compromised by the collective commitment to insure that some members do not have access” (powell, Heller, & Bundalli, 2011, p. 5).

It is imperative that I align and strengthen my internal conditions *prior* to making any changes related to equity (personal communication, University of Vermont, 2017). Therefore, I am the focus of this study in service to the larger task of deconstructing systems of oppression and domination.

³ Dyson (2018) also notes that “...whiteness is a fiction, ...a social construct, an agreed-upon myth that has empirical grit because of its effect, not its essence... it is a category of identity that is most useful when its very existence is denied.” (p. ix).

STRATEGIES AND METHODS

This project included didactic, literary, and experiential learning, alongside critical reflection. Journaling, conversations, and spaciousness for personal thought were my main reflection tools for internal processing and integration. In addition to Master's coursework on equity, I utilized the Voxer application to have asynchronous conversations with my advisor, Dr. Matt Kolan, in addition to weekly phone calls with a friend on a similar personal learning journey. I authored two short essays on privilege, whiteness, equity, and completed an 18-source literature review on environmental education and equity.

This work continues to be messy, destabilizing, colossal, and therefore authentically life-changing. Grace Lee Boggs and adrienne marie brown describe a strategy for engaging such a non-linear process, called emergent strategy. This strategy values relationships and collaboration, leadership which adapts in response to constant change, and building capacity for leveraging “relatively simple interactions to create complex patterns, systems, and transformations” (brown, 2017, p. 24). Emergent strategy is “non-linear and iterative” (p. 103) with knowledge that when “we release the framework of failure, we can realize that we are in iterative cycles, and we can keep asking ourselves--how do I learn from this?” (p. 105). Emergent strategy invites embodiment of the “just and liberated worlds we long for” (p. 24). This capstone project process aligns with the tenets of emergent strategy's iterative and changing processes leading to transformation. I also carry learning of emergent strategy forward in my leadership practice.

As described earlier, emergent strategy was the true “methodology” through which this process unfolded. Inviting emergent strategy coupled with rigorous inquiry and reflection generated deep, integrated learning.

RESULTS

This project was originally titled “Decolonizing a Single Story of Boulder: diversifying a youth program by illuminating and amplifying untold stories.” After learning about how “diversity and inclusion” initiatives can perpetuate structures of white supremacy, I refocused my learning to ensure that I not replicate oppression. This emergent question necessitated shifting the project toward a new title: “Deconstructing Program Diversity.” Yet as I considered “diversity,” I examined how my White cis-gendered identity influences this equity-centered work. This inquiry shifted my project focus again.

The next phase, that I tentatively entitled “Introspection for Equity: understanding White privilege in self and systems” brought deeper learning about my identity and raised critical questions about my workplace’s perpetuation of White supremacy. This phase illuminated perspectives from the White individuals on the decision-making team, which made clear why the organization was staffed entirely by like-minded White women. The viewpoints of the leadership prevented different ways of being from existing within the organization. Although these perspectives were not intended to be harmful, they have a negative impact of communities of Color. It is through the guise of "good intent" that White supremacy often is allowed to persist. As I attempted to address my concern for the patterns I was noticing, it became immediately apparent that there was a distinct lack of willingness or capacity⁴ to engage in critical conversations about race, diversity, or equity.

⁴ Dr. Matt Kolan offered criteria for consideration to determine whether change is possible: willingness, capacity, and potential for reciprocity where both parties will learn and grow.

It was incredibly destabilizing to learn of the damage that the organization and I were causing, and to feel unequipped for the task of cultivating change in this capacity. As this phase unfolded it was necessary that I remain committed to trusting that this realization was part of the process of emergent strategy. Dr. Matt Kolan (personal communication, January 7th, 2018) encouraged me to consider where my skills and commitment might be best suited in the work of change-making. This organization lacked the willingness and capacity for change, so any work I could do related to diversity and equity was unlikely to cause change. He encouraged me to consider also whether the work towards more equitable structures could be reciprocal⁵. I had a deep desire to spend more focused time learning about Whiteness, race, and equity, plus I was not willing to be complicit in White supremacy. I needed to grow my own capacities so that I can be better equipped when confronted with such an opportunity in the future, so I decided to leave the organization in pursuit of these goals.

It is “critical...[to use] the privilege and power we have to find places in systems where we can leverage change to make the system healthier” (Kolan & Sullivan, 2014, p. 8). This project offered opportunities to leverage change in myself and my personal community. One powerful way to leverage change within a system is by shifting a paradigm (Meadows, 1999, p. 3), and this project has effectively done so in me.

Altering a flow of information is another way to leverage change within a system (Meadows, 1999, p. 3). I am part of a system of family and friends, many of whom have joined in my thinking about whiteness and diversity. As I observe their questions and comments about race and diversity evolve, I wonder how much of these shifts are

⁵ Reciprocity, as described by M. Kolan (personal communication, February 10th and May 21st, 2018), is a relationship which is beneficial for both parties as well as the larger whole.

correlated to my own personal learning journey. What is the impact of my learning and growth on relationships? Because there is a strong effort within the system of White supremacy to ensure that White people are unaware of their privilege or the systems of oppression they perpetuate, I wonder how I might be able to leverage change by shifting an information flow, inviting other White people into conversations about race and Whiteness. However, talking about race with other White people without careful examination of *how* and *why* these conversations take place can further strengthen structures of white supremacy. As I examine these questions and navigate conversations about race, I must always consider the implications of my position in these relationships.

I have learned a tremendous amount about my own Whiteness, privilege, systemic oppression, and equity throughout this project as described in Appendix A. See Appendix B for an outline of a pivotal moment in my learning process.

EVALUATION AND ASSESSMENT

Understanding privilege, equity, race, and systemic oppression is a pursuit which will continue beyond this project. I have examined many questions, ideas, and implications of White privilege, equity, and diversity in my personal, professional, and leadership practices. New questions and ideas have emerged which have deepened my understanding of myself and the systems of which I am a part. The questions I carry forward at the conclusion of this Capstone will generate continued learning and growth.

I assessed the quality of my work through observable changes in both internal and external expressions of the learning. To determine growth and development in my internal work I reviewed my written and oral tracking journals and my notes from conversations with Dr. Matt Kolan and my thinking partner. I observed changes in my inquiry as my learning and integration developed.

To deepen my learning, I consistently solicited feedback from a variety of people who could offer different perspectives on the questions I was examining. Following these conversations, I used a journal to capture what emerged, whether questions, ideas, tension, or otherwise. These conversations and the reflection that followed helped me to learn how to apply a critical lens to my own thoughts and practices, while gathering new insights or questions.

The continued solicitation of feedback from people who could help identify what I missed, falsified, or needed to clarify was essential for integrity to the task of understanding how I can embody creating conditions for equity. There are many ways in which I am unaware of how I perpetuate White supremacy, so the process of receiving honest feedback from people who can see, understand and name those things in me is

essential to my growth towards embodied equity. I have observed the continued learning from such feedback processes as I have become able to identify the patterns in myself that I had previously been unaware of.

I remained committed to practicing emergent strategy. I was initially intimidated to discuss race, and within the last month, I noticed in my journal entries a shift toward excitement and appreciation for such spaces, signifying an area of great change in my personal practice.

I assessed learning by observing how my relationships changed throughout the process. I noticed a distinct increase in whether or how often I had conversations about Whiteness, power, and privilege, with close family and friends. This was evident in my personal experience and tracked in my journal.

I need relationships outside of this academic environment for accountability. Commitment to racial equity is now a central theme in my professional work and personal community building. I am integrating this learning into my current job search to set the expectation of myself and my future employer that social justice is imperative to the success⁶ of the organization. This is also a way that I am able to consider whether my learning is embodied and integrated.

I received written feedback after presenting this project to an audience of faculty, students, and the public on August 9th, 2018. Nearly all of the feedback offered gratitude for the “vulnerability” showed from the project and my delivery of the subject, specifically with regard to the process of becoming aware of my white privilege. Five of

⁶ “success” as defined by an organization. Creating conditions for multiple ways of being and knowing will improve an entity’s ability to do their work. Such conditions create equitable frameworks both internal to the organization and in external program engagement, deepening the impact of the organization towards the larger goal of equity.

the twenty-one audience members who offered feedback asked about my responsibility to continuing the learning process. For example, one person asked “what is your responsibility for sharing what you’ve learned?” Another wrote: “You getting up at the podium with conviction was a great way to use your privilege to address this issue.” While these comments validated the importance of sharing my personal journey, it made me wonder if sharing my story is enough to catalyze someone else’s privilege awareness journey. In what ways does this allow continued White complacency; and in what ways might this approach tenderly open them to the possibility of considering their own identity and impact? What other approaches might have been effective for inviting White folks into their personal responsibility to their privilege? I carry these questions forward for examination as my learning expands.

Another important question I received asked: “I wonder where and how you sought non-white voices and relationships in your journey and how you plan on pursuing them in the future.” One of the advisors for this project was a woman of Color who offered essential perspective, knowledge, and reflection throughout the process. Outside of this advisor, the non-White voices I sought were mostly through written, video, or otherwise published material. As I no longer have such an advisor after this program, I will carefully consider the questions above to ensure that I am listening to voices⁷ of people of Color to know how I can offer myself to the movement with adaptability.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND NEXT STEPS

This is a lifelong project. I have begun work which will never be finished or achieved, but rather will continuously grow, change, and reshape in emergent ways. I

⁷ As described in footnote 2, my work will be to take cues from leaders of Color in this movement without asking them to do *my* work of considering this question, putting more White burden on them.

will stay engaged in communities who value and take action towards creating an equitable future, and will more critically consider where I offer my professional skills.

Many new questions emerged during the final stages of this project, including the ones raised above. I will further study Culturally Sustaining/Revitalizing Pedagogy (CSRP) (Paris and Alim, 2014) to understand how nonprofit organizations with a focus of sustainability and education might utilize principles of CSRP to center equity. In addition to those, I am considering how fragility and vulnerability might be different or related. I'm going to learn more about "white culture" as this is a topic I haven't explored through this project or during my study, but was raised as an area for growth in my learning.

As I continue to examine how I carry this work forward in my professional practices, I'm wondering about how I integrate commitment to learning and embodiment towards equity into a workplace: how does my commitment to examining privilege and power generate opportunities for me, further strengthening White power? As "equity and diversity" are increasingly part of organization's goals⁸ I must continue to examine how I use my privilege and power with responsibility towards leadership which creates equitable conditions.

Transitioning out of this academic environment which supported perpetual learning and growth, I want to continue building my capacities in equity-centered leadership. To this end, I have begun seeking partners with whom I can share accountability to challenging systems of domination and oppression in my life. Reflection

⁸ Inclusion of "equity and diversity" statements in an organization's mission or goals does not assume equitable frameworks, practices, or values. Some organizations use such language as a tool for continuing to do the same work they've always done, sometimes with increased support or funding because of the new "commitment." "White people can unintentionally strengthen systems of oppression when doing diversity work, when using diversity as a "strategy"" (Kolan, personal communication, 2017). For example, "...increasing the numbers of traditionally underrepresented groups without altering power relations... is unlikely to improve the position of those groups substantially" (Thomas & Ely, 2001).

was a powerful learning tool throughout this Capstone experience, so I am considering how to build relationships around commitment to honest feedback. Feedback can be difficult, especially when navigating reactions of fragility, necessitating commitment to reciprocal feedback in a strong relationship.

Upon completion of this project I will be starting a conversation group among people interested in accountability partnership and examining equity content from lived experiences and other resources. I intend to create conditions which will build strong relationships among this small group to vulnerably engage with emergent questions and needs of ourselves, our group, and the larger movement towards equity. I will know that we are learning when we find tensions from previously held ideas, when I can again identify places within myself that are rooted in White supremacy, and when we call each other towards understanding our own mistakes or missed opportunities to shift away from patterns of White supremacy.

A very recent “blind spot” that was revealed to me through the process of gathering feedback on this report was my tendency to assume that all of the people I am in relationship with are White. As this project has brought awareness to the lack of racial diversity in my community, I created a narrative which actually strengthened that particular reality. As I submit this final draft, I’m deeply considering this particular narrative and working to reframe this towards one which recognizes and honors the relationships that I *do* have with people of different racial, cultural, and other identities. This exemplifies why rigorous and critical examination is necessary for changing my patterns towards creating conditions for all life to thrive.

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APPENDIX A

The table below outlines some of the outcomes of my learning throughout this project. The first section outlines Internal learning and reframing, and the second section includes external learning and reframing. Internal relates to new ideas (learning) and changing existing ideas (reframing) within my own ideologies or perspectives. Internal topics are not necessarily directly observable. External learning and reframing are observable and include new observable effects (learning) and what has changed (reframing) as a result of the project.

INTERNAL LEARNING	INTERNAL REFRAMING
<p>Personal Practices</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Internal conditions must reflect the conditions I wish for externally; start with learning and growth in myself before external commitments. - Personal reflection as generative learning process, especially in the presence of failure, misstep, fear, doubt, pride, and success. - Emergence as practice for leadership and learning. - Spaciousness and Self-Care for learning and integration. - Personal commitments to liberation; moral imperative to resist and reject participation in the systems that oppress PoC. Commitment to continued learning about my identity, my biases, my gifts to offer the movement. - Language: how does and how can language divide or unite us around equity? <p>Knowing of Self in relationship to External</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Racial identity development: understand my own race. - White privilege and Fragility: learn about and reflect upon my own patterns and expressions of Whiteness. - Reflection on insulation of childhood and family life in suburban Vermont. Who did that serve? What was the intention? What was the impact? - Relationships and community: considering how (and whether) my community reflects my beliefs. - Profession: What does my job support? How do I engage in a career to support my family while supporting my larger goals towards equity? If my job shows where my learning edges are, what does my current job reflect? <p>Understanding External/what's happening out there...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Systemic oppression: the system is built for the benefit of some (me - White), and the cost of others. 	<p>Personal Practices</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What is my life's purpose? - Vision: how to see practices and structures in everyday experiences which perpetuate racism, oppression, privilege and power to Whiteness. - Fear: understand fear as a reflection of Whiteness, work to establish new patterns with fear-based reactions. - Definitions: I.e. productivity; diversity; marginalized; equity; privilege; lucky; agency; responsibility; self-care; dominance; disruption; interconnectedness; an answer; intention; sensitivity; responsibility; vulnerability; permission; service; activism; right; - What does it look like to embody belief in something, especially when it counters the status quo? - Learning: consider what is true learning (often in opposition to what academia and public schooling would consider learning). - Gratitude offerings for relationships with human and non-human as a foundation for change. - White fragility: understanding it to choose new frames which cultivate strength, perseverance, and resilience. - Productivity - reframed to include centering practices of self-care and spaciousness. - Affirmation: discerning when affirmation aids learning and growth and when it blankets and blinds the possibility for deeper analysis. <p>Understanding External...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Public education: What is the purpose of schooling? Who is public schooling for? What are the outcomes and impacts of the current structure? - Learning: what needs to be shifted or strengthened, taught or learned in order to

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Power and privilege: as a theory and practice - Critical pedagogies: teaching philosophy which questions and challenges systemic oppression and domination. - Racism in American schooling, historical context and present reality. - Indigenous: historical truths of colonization and “Native American” genocide, continued intentional, systemic marginalization and attempted cultural erasure. - Decolonization: a process for repatriating land and rights to Indigenous Peoples. - Ready to engage? Considering willingness, capacity, impact, and reciprocity, as tools for considering how and when to put energy into relationships. 	<p>realize an equitable future, whether in or out of school?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Context! Using context to dramatically shift understanding of (anything and specifically) race. - Coded language: reading beneath the lines to reveal deeper held beliefs about race, i.e. perfectly logical explanations = oppressive practices; neighborhood improvement projects = gentrification; good school = all white school; etc. - Who and what does “the academy” serve to strengthen and promote? - Critical thinking versus critical inquiry: how education has defined “critical” to mean logical process for problem-solving, rather than questioning patterns of domination, oppression, and marginalization.
<p>EXTERNAL LEARNING</p>	<p>EXTERNAL REFRAMING</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Action from vision: new ability to act based on ability to “see” the ways in which systemic oppression operates (what is intended to be invisible), including discussion, written, or demonstrating. - Value-based strength for action: using personal commitment to action for equity as the strength to make large and small changes such as leaving my professional workplace, questioning a professor’s language around equity, and speaking up about racist or harmful comments from friends or family. - Seeking learning: attending demonstrations, workshops, and talks about whiteness, diversity, equity. Actively choosing to remain open to uncomfortable, painful, and fear-inducing truths. - Practice: increased number of conversations about race, equity, diversity, increasing confidence and resilience within the sometimes difficult conversations. - Integration into professional work: changes in personnel management, workshops, trainings I lead, integrating some of learning into professional practice. In job search, I use new language and pay attention within the application and interview process to include my commitments as well as an assessment of which organizations value and center equity. - Conversations about race: new ability to talk about race and my learning journey in personal and professional relationships. - New relationships built as a result of this learning. Finding friendships which offer reciprocal shared learning about equity. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Increased confidence when asking questions and offering personal learning about race, privilege, and equity. - Emergence: let go of the outcome in order to find the more generative path, slowing down to listen for the next better question or opportunity. - Discuss how public education has and continues to preference white students, to build pathways to their success while preventing opportunities for students of Color, growing the opportunity gap. - Importance of relationships: as a movement strategy, as a liberation strategy, as a learning opportunity, - Shifting existing relationships: how to shift previous relationships when my lens and values have shifted, to include conversations about race and equity. - Investment: when and where to invest in building or attempting to shift relationships that are dissonant with my values. - Calling in, Calling out: considering how and when to speak up about issues that previously did not seem harmful. - Listening: learning how to listen without judgement, but with empathy and critical lens for racial bias. Listening to others and to my own thought patterns.

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Loss of relationships as a result of this learning and my resolve to resist perpetuating those systemic issues.- Gratitude as a practice for building healthy relationships, strong connections, and reciprocity among human and non-human beloveds.- Becoming a thinking partner: close family and friends now offer observations and questions related to equity, rather than simply responding to mine, showing that they are also considering these patterns independent of me.- High-stakes Conversations: using my privilege to build relationships and have conversations about race with people in positions of power (i.e. professor, supervisors, colleagues, employees); understanding when and how to have said conversations, and staying committed to the task.- Responsibility to the conversation: acknowledging and honoring the importance and power my White self bringing other White folks into the conversation about inequality | |
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APPENDIX B

To help demonstrate some of the results of this project, I will summarize a pivotal moment in this learning process. The first time I engaged in an in-depth discussion about race with White men was a two-hour conversation between myself, my fiancé, and my brother-in-law. After I finished readings which described horrific things Whites have done to African Americans and people of Color in America (lynching, beating, rape, redlining, inequitable education systems, and more), I was filled with immense grief and overwhelming anger. I opened a conversation about this difficult subject, pushing past the discomfort agitating me by trusting the strength of our relationship. I felt vulnerable in taking this risk and recognize that it took courage, experiencing my own white fragility within a perfectly safe context. They surprised me with their willingness to deeply engage in the discomfort of the topic which challenged my ever present assumptions about the negative reactions White men will have to conversations about race.

Over the two hour conversation, I witnessed their perspectives and expressions of fragility as well as my own. I engaged with defensiveness, moves to innocence⁹, and the tendency to solve the system while moving away from personal responsibility. I drew on personal strength to identify problematic or harmful reactions and ideas. I acknowledged that our understanding of the topics is limited and that we will not have closure on the questions we explored, naming the ways the desire for closure and whole knowledge reflect the oppressive dominant culture.

⁹ Tuck and Yang (2012) describe “moves to innocence” in the context of decolonization. In their quotation here, the settler can be considered the White colonist: “Settler moves to innocence are those strategies or positionings that attempt to relieve the settler of feelings of guilt or responsibility without giving up land or power or privilege, without having to change much at all” (p. 10).

This experience built my confidence to engage in conversations about race and cemented my understanding of the importance of relationship. It allowed me to practice recognizing my own White fragility. I have drawn on this experience countless times when I need strength for engaging in conversations about race.