White Men as Advocates for Diversity

Michael Welp, PhD

The room is still. People around the circle lean forward listening, patient as Joyce struggles to find words to share a childhood experience. Through tears, Joyce gets to the heart of her story. One hot afternoon, while out with her grandmother, she was denied use of a public drinking fountain. The fountain was off limits, marked "For Whites Only." In response, her grandmother had struggled with the impossible, trying to explain why Joyce could not drink from that fountain, while still trying to protect her from the damage of racism.

Michael Welp, PhD, is co-founder of White Men as Full Diversity Partners® and founder of EqualVoice.

For the seven white men in this graduate class, this classmate's memory had potential to trigger deep learning. I was one of those white men. Though I do not remember many details of Joyce's story, I do remember her pain. This key experience was one of several events in my life which catalyzed a transformative journey toward advocating for inclusion and equity. Had some of these learning events not occurred, I fear I could easily still promote the status quo and collude with inequality. This self-awareness was the starting point in my search to identify experiences which have created similar transformation in other white men.

I embarked on a study of the existing literature on white men and diversity, and explored the significant life experiences of eight white men identified by their peers as advocates for inclusion and equity. I wanted to answer this question: What are the learning experiences of white men in becoming advocates for inclusion and equity in organizations? In this article, I share the results of my research and what I've learned in my quest to answer this question.

The study focused on identifying specific events and themes that have played a significant role in the development of advocacy in white men. The emergent patterns of factors which were present for many of the study participants are particularly useful to white men who pursue their own growth in this area, as well as to those responsible for coaching and developing these skills and attitudes in others.

"I wanted to answer this question: What are the learning experiences of white men in becoming advocates for inclusion and equity in organizations? In this article, I share the results of my research and what I've learned in my quest to answer this question."

Regarding the eight study participants, it is important to note that most of them work as consultants in organizational development and diversity, and are:

- willing to take a stand to support inclusion and equity in the face of resistance;
- one of a small group of professionals in this country who bring attention to these issues;
- recognized as advocates by women, people of color, gay, lesbian, bisexual, the disabled, as well as by white men; and
- demonstrating the commitment of significant time and resources.

Seven Key Themes Emerged from the Literature

Research on the topic of white men and diversity is scarce, at best. Nevertheless, enough

articles are available to build an initial conceptual framework that captures the journey of white men as advocates. Seven key themes emerged from the existing literature.

1. The need for increased self awareness: A critical step in any personal change process is increasing self-awareness, which includes knowing your own strengths, weaknesses, feelings, beliefs, how you are viewed by others and your effect on others.[1] Chuck Ball said, "First, we have to recognize that we have been lying to ourselves and each other about our experiences and what we know.... After that, we start seeing, hearing and feeling racism and sexism everywhere."[2]

White men who lack this self-awareness can be found at all levels of power. Retired General Colin Powell said, "The problem with Reagan and Bush and Weinberger and their ilk is that they just never knew. [Bush and Reagan were] two of the closest people in my life [but on the issue of racism] they were never sensitized to it.... This was an area where I found them wanting."[3]

2. The need to deal with feelings is one of the strongest themes throughout the literature on white men.[4] Specifically, recognizing the need to deal with depression and guilt, which often come from recognizing our own contribution to oppression.[5] These emotions, while important in completing some processes of change or loss, can be a place where individuals get stuck and freeze with inaction. Shelby Steele warns, "What makes it so powerful is the element of fear that guilt always carries, fear of what the guilty knowledge says about us. Guilt makes us afraid for ourselves and so generates as much self-preoccupation as concern for others. The nature of this preoccupation is always the redemption of innocence, the re-establishment of good feeling about oneself."[6]

> **"The need to deal with feelings is one of the strongest themes throughout the literature on white men. Specifically, recognizing the need to deal with depression and guilt, which often come from recognizing our own contribution to oppression."**

Cheri Brown states that "guilt is the glue that holds prejudice together,"[7] and therefore becomes an immobilizing force in the movement toward inclusion and equity. Thomas Kochman notes that culturally, white men believe "I have to have it all right," or said another way, "it's wrong to be wrong."[8] This makes it hard to admit mistakes, or the things that we do not know. White men culturally do not tolerate uncertainty well, responding to it with a reactive posture. This can lead to withdrawal, denial or resistance.[9]

3. The need to realize the dimensions of the problem. Duncan Spelman elaborates on this need, saying that race and gender dynamics are as ubiquitous as the water around a fish: we do not notice these dynamics because we're so thoroughly immersed! He notes that "Because our [white male] race-gender group is 'the norm' we do not see how powerfully different the experience is for members of other groups."[10]

4. Use of models and conceptual frameworks. This helps us examine how people with differing perspectives interact and create dynamics at individual, group, organizational and societal levels.[11] There are numerous models/frameworks: one clarifies active versus passive oppression,[12] while another describes a model of developing intercultural sensitivity.[13] Yet another set of frameworks focuses on issues of race and white racial identity theory.[14] Intergroup theory is also a fundamental construct required to comprehend dynamics of difference beyond the individual. Numerous theorists[15] emphasize that we must "learn to see ourselves as racial beings" and "members of multiple identity groups." Robert Terry was one of the first authors to suggest examining what it meant to be white, coining the term "to be white is not to have to think about it."[16]

5. The need for a "core values metamorphosis." Working with these issues leads a person to ask, "What do I stand for around these issues and realities? What values do I talk and walk?" White men find it hard to consistently walk the values of inclusion and equity.[18]

6. The need to envision the personal benefits of equity,[19] which include:

- greater authenticity in relationships;
- increased knowledge and appreciation of differences;
- deeper compassion for others;
- increase in trust and respect from women and people of color;
- decrease in feeling the need to fill traditional roles and styles;
- far less guilt and discomfort from living in an unfair environment;
- a clearer sense of one's own identity as an individual and group member;
- an understanding of the material, psychic, intellectual and moral costs of maintaining a privileged status; and
- learning to transcend the dysfunctional aspects of white culture.

> **"Working with these issues leads a person to ask, "What doI stand for around these issues and realities? What values do I talk and walk?"**

7. The need for support systems. One way to achieve this involves connecting white men on similar journeys who can support the development of new white identities and core values.

All of these themes were taken into account in the preparation of questions for the interviews conducted with study participants. For example, given the variety of feelings generated and the different reactions, it was important that this study capture the feelings of the white man's experience, as well as the impact of those feelings.

Themes that Emerged from the Study

After extensive interviews with the study participants, eight themes emerged. The first theme was *the early context* of each advocates' life that triggered learning and set the stage for later reflection. Important highlights of this context include parents, religion, class and family background. Many advocates saw or heard their parents discriminated against, or saw or heard their parents discriminate against others. In their "youthful innocence," not yet hardened to discrimination, it struck them; they did not forget. In some cases, it was hearing the racist language of a relative. In other cases, it was learning about the persecution of their parents' religious or ethnic heritage.

Another factor was change in economic means. While all advocates were middle or upper-middle class, two saw their early backgrounds as lower class and another as lower-middle class. Still another began as upper-middle class and currently lives as middle class. The other advocates have remained consistently middle class throughout their lives. Many commented that they thought class was emerging as a critical component in the future of diversity issues in our country. All the advocates declared themselves straight, and all are married or have been married at least once.

Second, all of these white men had been exposed to or come into *close contact with difference.* This occurred through Peace Corps volunteering, involvement with the civil rights movement, college activism and travel in third world countries. Other important sources included networks, such as the National Training Laboratories Institute (NTL), and their professional work. All advocates had a period in which they realized they were working more frequently with people from other categories, especially regarding race and gender.

I found an even split in tracking whether this close contact with difference came from the

advocates' pursuit of organization development (OD) versus direct pursuit of diversity issues. Half of the participants entered the diversity field via the study of OD, which speaks to the importance of organizations such as NTL that value diversity in their board structure, membership and trainings. These types of organizations provide critical exposure to difference and diversity issues.

This variance in the pathway toward advocacy reflects a major dilemma in the field: Do you approach diversity as a specific issue to work, or do you weave it into a broader focus of cultural change? The variety of paths taken by these advocates suggests that a broad focus serves initially to attract others into personal and professional work around diversity. In examining the stories of those advocates whose journeys began with an OD focus, all came to understand the systemic issues of diversity after it had become a special focus for them.

"…in asking advocates what prevented earlier transitionstoward advocacy, it became apparent that at some point there was a readiness for learning, the desire to move beyonda focus on self."

Third, in asking advocates what prevented earlier transitions toward advocacy, it became apparent that at some point there was a *readiness for learning*, the desire to move beyond a focus on self. Some advocates spoke of an early focus on career success that prevented them from seeing beyond themselves. Others talked about needing clarity around "who they were." For some, this meant developing an intellectual framework, while for others it meant identifying their own values. There appeared to be a need for a degree of personal strength to separate from one's early context, as well as from the prevailing white male culture.

Moving beyond the individual level in ways of knowing was precipitated for some by being treated as a group member, as when one advocate found himself treated with mistrust and suspicion while evaluating poverty programs. One important element of this shift shared by all advocates brings us to the fourth theme — *individual acceptance of themselves as members of the white male category*. This was a sign of gaining a more systemic understanding of issues of oppression. It also signaled a move from either/or logic to both/and logic in seeing one's self as both an individual and a member of a category. While the timing varied widely across advocates as to when they made this adjustment, it was shared by all of the advocates, though it often took extended time to fully comprehend a systemic view of oppression.

Fifth, one of the strongest themes that emerged in this study was *the lack of other white male role models* influencing the men in this study. One exception was the youngest advocate, who had both white male peers as well as older white men who were strong role models. The other seven men simply did not have close white male mentors help them learn about diversity issues. Most of them focused on relationships across categories of difference for support, validation and learning. Even the participant who benefited from white male mentors felt that his relationships across categories of difference were the primary source of learning and growth.

There was a mark of regret shared by numerous advocates at not having had more connections with other white male advocates. Overall, I sensed a degree of separation from other white men and aspects of white male culture in general. With advancing generations, perhaps this dynamic will shift to create more white men as role models and mentors.

The sixth clear theme that surfaced was a *transition from passive exposure to difference, to actively building relationships and support across categories of difference.* This transition appeared universally for this group. Exposure led to actively seeking out continued avenues for learning and growth. These relationships generated a strong source of support, validation and affirmation. This, in turn, created the support systems necessary to engage in the challenges and confrontations required for the depth of learning essential to move toward advocacy.

I cannot emphasize enough how strong an impact these relationships had in furthering these

journeys toward advocacy. Advocates described these relationships as pivotal: allowing them to be vulnerable, to show who they were, furthering the depth and significance of their learning journey. A number of advocates described this colleagueship as the best part of doing the work they do. As one advocate put it, "Safety came from never being alone in this process."

Seventh, this group as a whole has, over time, *redefined their core identities to incorporate life as an advocate.* For the participants in this study, advocacy is a journey, not a destination. The way each advocate goes about this work is a reflection of who he is on his journey. Some motivations are internal, such as the empowering of oneself to live fully. Others are external, working toward social justice or a vision of a new world. The former indicates the need for strength to speak and to take action. The latter speaks to the necessity of being committed to a purpose such as the values of inclusion and equity. For these advocates, each of these two elements feeds and supports the other, creating growth through the ongoing process of advocating.

> **"The sixth clear theme that surfaced was a transition from passive exposure to difference, to actively building relationships and support across categories of difference. This transition appeared universally for this group."**

Finally, these advocates expressed a variety of areas they consider *current learning edges.* The difficulty of being with other white men stood out the clearest. It appears that this continues to be a challenging task. Some advocates talked of situations in their work where diversity projects failed partly based on their struggle to connect with the white men in the system. Most talked of needing to find new ways to make this connection. A few identified a pattern called "dumbing down," where white men lose touch with the wisdom and common sense they have when the topic is diversity. The challenge appears to be how to reconnect with other white men from whom they have separated.

Another challenge highlighted was retaining a focus on elimination of oppression as part of their OD work, both in personal practice and in contributing to theory development. Advocates spoke about their diversity work in mixed gender and racial coalitions, and the dilemma of being an equally strong member without reinforcing the group dynamic of playing the dominant white man. Yet another challenge mentioned was to train a new generation of advocates. Other current growth edges involved patience and owning their feminine sides.

The journey of these eight white men began when they moved from their early context of upbringing to increased exposure to differences. Their advocacy began to grow as they actively built support networks across categories of difference in order to face the challenges of the journey. With this safety, their learning continued as they found more and more challenging contexts to grow from. At some point, their sense of advocacy became redefined as a core part of their identity. They now see their journey as a continual process of ongoing action and reflection. Growing their advocacy has thus become a part of growing themselves.

Closing Thoughts
One of the advocates suggested I ask about the motivations of other advocates around three areas: faith, hope and vision; anger or rightness; and love. I found the advocates seemed to have varying relationships with hope and faith. One said he had lost hope, while another no longer paid attention to the outcome but rather had learned to value the struggle itself. One advocate sees his job as keeping the pilot lit amongst those ready to keep the flame, until something or somebody in the future fuels that flame to spread. Most advocates saw themselves as moving from motivation based on anger toward motivation based more on compassion. In moving toward compassion, one advocate said, "The only way to

> **"Most advocates saw themselves as moving from motivation based on anger toward motivation based more on compassion. In moving toward compassion, one advocate said, "The only way to really touch other white men is through love.""**

really touch other white men is through love."

Recent research into human consciousness recognizes the power of love, acceptance and reason as more powerful than elements of force, such as anger, guilt and shame.[20] White men need to find better ways to affirm, validate and support each other to create the safety necessary to transfer challenges received into positive growth and learning.

Our world is increasingly multicultural and diverse, yet most organizations are run by white men who do not fully understand or support efforts to embrace wider circles of traditions, beliefs and differences. In this country, success in creating equity in organizations is linked to the ability of white men to move toward awareness, action and advocacy in supporting inclusion and equity.

My hope is that the results of this research can be utilized to help other white men accelerate the process of becoming advocates for inclusion and equity.

This article is based on Michael Welp's 1997 doctoral dissertation "Pathways to Diversity for White Males: A Study of White Males Learning Experiences on the Path Toward Advocating for Inclusion and Equity," The Fielding Institute. Since earning his PhD, Michael has facilitated interracial teambuilding for South African corporations, and recently co-authored three field guides about engaging white men in diversity. He is an adjunct faculty member at Capella University and recipient of the Minnesota Organization Development Practitioner of the Year Award. He can be reached at welp@wmfdp.com.

1. Neal, Rob, "The Conversion of White Men to Equity and Diversity in the Workplace." *OD Practitioner*, 1993.
2. Ball, Chuck, "A White Man's Journey." *The Diversity Factor* , Vol 1, No. 3, 1993.
3. In an interview with *The New Yorker*, "They Just," September 25, 1995, p. 2.
4. Spelman, Duncan. "White Men and Managing Diversity." *The Diversity Factor* Vol. 1, No. 3, 1993.
5. Alderfer, Clayton P., "Problems of Changing White Males' Behavior and Beliefs Concerning Race Relations." In Change in Organizations, edited by Paul S. Goodman and and Associates. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1984.
6. Steele, Shelby. The Content of Our Character. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990.
7. Brown, Cheri. "National Coalition Building Institute's Prejudice Reduction Workshop." Paper presented at the Congress of the International Society for Intercultural Education, Training, and Research, Boston, May-June 1989.
8. Kochman, Thomas. "Culturally-Based Patterns of Difference." Paper presented at the Effective Mangement of Cultural Diversity, Chicago, 1992.
9. Spelman, Duncan. "White Men and Managing Diversity." *The Diversity Factor*, Vol. 1, No. 3, 1993.
10.   Ibid.
11.   Neal, Rob, "The Conversion of White Men to Equity and Diversity in the Workplace." *OD Practitioner*, 1993.
12.   Chesler, Mark A., "Racetalk: Thinking and Talking About Racism." *The Diversity Factor* Vol. 3, No. 3, 1995.
13.   Bennett, Milton J., and Barbara R. Deane. "A Model for Personal Change: Developing Intercultural Sensitivity." In *The Promise of Diversity*, edited by Elsie Y. Cross, Judith H. Katz, Frederick A. Miller and Edith Whitfield Seashore. Burr Ridge, Illinois: Irwin, 1994.
14.   Helms, Janet E. , "The Conceptualization of Racial Identity and Other Racial Constructs." In Human Diversity: Perspectives of People in Context, edited by Edison J. Trickett, Roderick J. Watts and Dina Birman. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994. Jackson, Bailey, and Rita Hardiman. "Social Justice - Social Diversity." Paper presented at the Developing High Performing Culturally Diverse Organizations, Washington, D.C., 1993.
15.   - Alderfer, Clayton P., "Problems of Changing White Males' Behavior and Beliefs Concerning Race Relations." In Change in Organizations, edited by Paul S. Goodman and and Associates. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1984.
- "A White Man's Perspective on the Unconscious Processes within Black-White Relations in the United States." In *Human Diversity: Perspectives of People in Context*, edited by Edison J. Trickett, Roderick J. Watts and Dina Birman. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994.
- Chesler, Mark A. "Racetalk: Thinking and Talking About Racism." *The Diversity Factor* Vol. 3, No. 3, 1995.
- Loeser, Ronnie, and Dave Hackett, "White Awareness Work ... Why Me?" 1991.
16. Terry, Robert, "The White Male Club." *Civil Rights Digest*, Vol. 6, No. 3, 1974: Terry, Robert, For Whites Only. Revised ed. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1975.
17. Neal, Rob, "The Conversion of White Men to Equity and Diversity in the Workplace." *OD Practitioner*, 1993.
18. - Chesler, Mark A., "Racetalk: Thinking and Talking About Racism." The Diversity Factor Vol. 3, No. 3, 1995

-Clayton Alderfer, "A White Man's Perspective on the Unconscious Processes within Black-White Relations in the United States." In Human Diversity: Perspectives of People in Context, edited by Edison J. Trickett, Roderick J. Watts and Dina Birman, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994
19. Neal, Rob, "The Conversion of White Men to Equity and Diversity in the Workplace." *OD Practitioner*, 1993.
20. Hawkins, David, *Power vs. Force: An Anatomy of Consciousness*. Sedona, AZ: Veritas Publishing, 1995.