



1-2013

## Developing a White Anti-racism Identity: A Psycho-educational Group Model

Kathryn Kristin Berg  
*Loyola University Chicago*

Shirley Simon  
*Loyola University Chicago, [ssimon@luc.edu](mailto:ssimon@luc.edu)*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://ecommons.luc.edu/socialwork\\_facpubs](https://ecommons.luc.edu/socialwork_facpubs)



Part of the [Social Work Commons](#)

### Recommended Citation

Berg, KK and S Simon. "Developing a White anti-racism identity: A psycho-educational group model." *Groupwork* 23(1), 2013.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Publications and Other Works by Department at Loyola eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Social Work: School of Social Work Faculty Publications and Other Works by an authorized administrator of Loyola eCommons. For more information, please contact [ecommons@luc.edu](mailto:ecommons@luc.edu).



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License](#).  
© Whiting and Birch, 2013.

# Developing a White anti-racism identity: A psycho-educational group model

Kathryn K. Berg<sup>1</sup> and Shirley R. Simon<sup>2</sup>

**Abstract.** *This paper describes and assesses a seven session psycho-educational group on anti-racism identity development for White European-American undergraduate students at a midwestern U.S. university. It is predicated on the premise that Whiteness can simultaneously privilege and harm White people, and that White students have the potential to become personally invested in the challenging of systematic racism. It is also based on the idea that a group structure presents an ideal format for addressing this topic. Peer support, a safe environment, and information are requisites for facilitating personal exploration of this sensitive subject. A group model for addressing this topic is presented and assessed. Key considerations, essential elements, strengths and weaknesses, suggestions for replication and further research are discussed.*

**Keywords.** *social groupwork; White identity development; racial justice; psycho-educational groups; undergraduate students*

1. Community Support Specialist at Thresholds
2. Associate Professor, School of Social Work, Loyola University

**Address for correspondence:** Kathryn K. Berg, MSW, MA Women's Studies & Gender Studies, 4012 N. Francisco Ave., Chicago, IL 60618, USA. [berg.kathryn@gmail.com](mailto:berg.kathryn@gmail.com). Shirley R. Simon, MSW, LCSW, Associate Professor, School of Social Work, Loyola University Chicago, 820 North Michigan Avenue, Chicago, IL 60611, USA. [ssimon@luc.edu](mailto:ssimon@luc.edu).

**Date of first (online) publication:**

## Introduction

Racism can harm White European-Americans while it simultaneously privileges this same population. This is a challenging concept for many to grasp, including the typical White person in the United States who likely considers racism deplorable. While the consequences for White European-Americans who challenge racism pale in comparison to the impact of systemic racism on people-of-color, Whites often have less incentive and less support systems readily available to motivate long-term racial justice advocacy. In order to empower Whites to develop their anti-racism capabilities, informational resources, emotional resilience, and support systems are needed to withstand any resulting social repercussions.

Whites are socialized to see racism not as a system, but as isolated behaviors enacted by highly unethical or uneducated people (Akintunde, 1999). In reality, racism is an everyday, commonplace occurrence. In order to effectively interrupt White supremacy, Whites require the willingness and emotional capacity to acknowledge and deal with the racist implications of their own thoughts and behaviors. When feelings of shame, anger, guilt, and denial are at the root of someone's racially problematic thought patterns, education and exposure alone are not sufficient interventions (Tochluk, 2008). Furthermore, to effect lasting change, White people must develop the capacity to effectively advocate for racial justice by challenging and supporting other Whites (Tatum, 1997). The interpersonal challenges that White European-Americans often face as they develop anti-racism identities, such as compromised support systems and immature defense mechanisms, also need to be addressed in order to eliminate racism.

Some anti-racism educators assert that the most prevalent and insidious form of racism in present day society is 'color-blindness' (Wise, 2010). Often, White European-Americans are socialized to think that acknowledging someone's race is inherently racist. In fact, the opposite is true: to fail to see someone's race is to neglect to understand the role that systemic racism plays in that person's life (Kendall, 2006). For Whites, this largely stems from a lack of understanding of the impact that Whiteness has on their lives. Consequently, White European-Americans normalize and maintain Whiteness as the status quo. The antidote for this color-blindness is helping Whites develop a racial

identity. When Whites can truly understand the role of race in their own lives and in society as a whole, they have a greater capacity to interrupt racism (Helms, 1992; Okun, n.d.).

A group format is an ideal model for fostering racial identity development for White European-Americans. By providing a safe, supportive environment for interactions with peers around this sensitive topic, a group can enable the honest exploration and reflection necessary for participants' growth and development. Sharing the often painful processes of self-assessment, acceptance of personal responsibility and commitment to change with those who are similar in race, age, and educational level provides the universality and hope that can facilitate change. As members learn about and explore racial justice with White European-American leaders and peers, they can come to appreciate that Whites need to assume responsibility for educating other Whites about racial injustice, and can, in fact, practice the interpersonal skills to do so. Moreover, providing this experience and training to college or university age students may capitalize on the opportunity to influence a population that is typically open to self-assessment and personal reflection.

### **A group model of support**

A White identity development group was initiated at an urban, midwestern university. It aimed to provide White European-American undergraduate students with information, support, and encouragement to address racial injustice. Based upon a number of conceptual frameworks discussed later in this paper, as well as diversity materials already developed by the University's Center for Student Diversity, a curricular model on anti-racism training for White undergraduate students was created with the purpose of engaging these students in the Center's mission of multiculturalism. The Center for Student Diversity funded a pilot group based on this model. By offering training and support to White students with a strong interest in anti-racism, it was hoped that they, in turn, would educate peers within their racial group and hold them accountable for racial justice.

### **Goals of the group**

This paper discusses the curricular model and learning outcomes of the seven session psycho-educational group on White identity development. The model was grounded in the principles and practices of effective social groupwork, including universalization, mutual aid and peer support (Drumm, 2006). There were three key goals for the group. The first was to provide White European-American undergraduate students with additional skills, information, and supports so that they could act as more effective allies for people-of-color. The second was for the student-participants to explore the impact of Whiteness on themselves, their families, and their communities in the interest of understanding how racism both privileges and harms Whites. Third, the group aimed to help student-participants learn that they, as White European-Americans, are responsible for holding other Whites accountable for racial justice, without being experts on the lived experience of racial oppression.

Overall, the major learning outcomes for the training were divided into three categories: knowledge, values, and skills. With regard to knowledge, it was anticipated that student-participants would be able to define systematic racism, describe the history of Whiteness, situate their families within that history, and describe their personal experiences of White privilege. Furthermore, participants would be able to identify examples of exemplary past and present White racial justice allies, individuals who have demonstrated an outstanding commitment to anti-racism work, often at great risk, throughout their career. In the area of values, it was hoped that participants would appreciate the concept of a healthy White anti-racism identity, understand their own experiences as members of a White racial group, and actively promote racial justice by engaging in respectful, constructive discussion of racial micro-aggressions, or individual instances in which people-of-color experience the discriminatory effects of racism. With regard to skills, the group aimed to help participants utilize new strategies to identify and interrupt racial micro-aggressions in their daily lives, demonstrate interpersonal skills for building relationships with White racial justice advocates, and utilize techniques for enhancing self-awareness regarding White identity development. Please see Table 1 for a summary of these objectives.

Table 1  
Summary of knowledge, values, and skills objectives

---

*Knowledge*

Provide examples of exemplary White racial justice allies in history and the present  
Define systematic racism and situate one's personal experience of White privilege  
Describe the history of Whiteness and situate one's family within that history

---

*Values*

Appreciate the importance of a healthy White anti-racism identity  
Be able to reframe one's experiences within the context of membership in a White racial group  
Appreciate the need for respectful, constructive discussion of racial micro-aggressions

---

*Skills*

Use new tools to identify and interrupt racial micro-aggressions in one's daily life  
Use new tools for self-awareness to progress in one's White identity development  
Demonstrate interpersonal skills for building relationships with White racial justice allies

---

**Recruitment**

The primary recruitment method was class visitations with professors whose coursework incorporated issues of social justice. Most participants were recruited through brief, five to ten minute class presentations about the group. This strategy was based upon the premise that direct contact with prospective group members is an effective way of recruiting participants (Toseland & Rivas, 2012). The leader was introduced as a representative of the Center for Student Diversity, promoting a new program entitled, *What's it like to be White? White identity development and anti-racism training*. The training group was described as an opportunity for White European-American students to learn about 'Whiteness' and to have conversations about racial justice. The facilitator explained that challenging racism can be a difficult and emotionally trying experience, and this group would provide a supportive environment for gaining information, self-awareness, and practical skills for interrupting racism. The facilitator provided information about the curriculum and application procedures, and answered students' questions. Copies of the flier and application form were distributed. Additional recruitment

---

tools included the distribution of fliers and presentations to student organizations.

### **Conceptual frameworks**

A number of conceptual frameworks provided the foundation for this pilot project: social groupwork principles; person-in-environment perspective; cognitive-behavioral theory; and two White identity development models.

The principles of effective groupwork provided an overarching framework for the training. Yalom's (2005) therapeutic factors served as an ongoing foundation for group intervention. Cohesion, a critical component of effective groups, was consciously encouraged throughout the seven sessions. Fostering universality was also critical to facilitate a safe, open environment as participants developed a growing sense of themselves as members of the same racial group and explored the sensitive issues evoked by this training. Being amongst racial peers gave the members permission to share honestly and to view themselves non-defensively. Interpersonal learning was observed as members gained insight and self-awareness during the here-and-now moments of the group discussion. Imparting information, in both the more formal didactic form and direct advice from members, was, of course, a critical component of the group process. The presentations by guest experts as well as the sharing of ideas among the members provided essential information and perspectives.

Issues of group development were also a concern. Beginning considerations of safety, trust, contracting and participation were particularly essential given the sensitive nature of the subject. Middle stage issues included facilitation and clarification of process and incorporation of appropriate programmatic activities. Effective closure strategies to maintain and implement the goals of the group were also important. As in most groups, the role of the leader was critical to its success. For this group, the role of the leader as facilitator, role model, and 'non-hierarchical expert' was also crucial (Yalom, 2005; Bernstein, 1973; Berman Rossi, 1993).

In addition, the model incorporated the person-in-environment framework and cognitive-behavioral theory. The person-in-environment perspective allowed student-participants to situate their personal

experiences within a broader perspective of systematic racism. While the group members gained an understanding of the various forms of racism and the different ways that it is maintained, it was also recognized that the members had been socialized to uphold systems of White supremacy (Monkman, 1991). The group incorporated cognitive-behavioral theory to support students in altering thought patterns and defenses that perpetuate racism (Magen, 2009). In order for student-participants to view racial tensions through an anti-racism lens, members explored how thought patterns influence emotional reactions to racially charged topics and events. Cognitive-behavioral techniques, such as reframing, were incorporated. Support for changes in identity development was provided throughout the training.

Finally, two White identity development models by Janet Helms and Tema Okun served as foundations for understanding the stages of growth leading to a healthy White anti-racism identity. Janet Helm's (1992) six stage model is frequently referenced in the literature, and is useful in understanding White identity development and the transitional stages between a state of 'color-blindness' and White anti-racism identity. Tema Okun (n.d.) identifies nine stages that lead to actively becoming anti-racist and subsequently maintaining that identity as part of a life-long effort. Material from both of these authors was shared with the group.

### **Structure of the group**

The group required a minimum of six students and was capped at a maximum of twelve. This size was thought to be small enough to allow time for everyone to contribute to each discussion, but large enough to include diversity in strengths, perspective, and experience (Toseland & Rivas, 2012). There were seven group sessions, each two hours long. It was believed that this length of time would be sufficient to achieve learning outcomes while accommodating the competing scheduling demands of the student-participants. Dinner was provided fifteen minutes before the sessions began with members allowed to continue eating during the first half of the session. By providing dinner, the facilitator addressed one of the practical considerations of the time slot while simultaneously creating a nurturing environment. Meetings were held in a small, private room in the campus union thereby maximizing confidentiality.

In order to identify changes in comprehension of key concepts as well as participants' self-assessments of their achievement of the learning objectives, pre- and post-test surveys were administered to all participants. The surveys consisted of a series of 14 questions using a five-point Likert scale, plus one open-ended question on the post-test requesting respondents to identify their most important learning. These surveys received approval from the Institutional Review Board of the sponsoring university.

Participants were provided with a booklet of readings, homework exercises, and a journal to foster ongoing growth outside of the actual meetings. All sessions opened with a brief presentation and discussion of an exemplary White ally from the past or present. These allies served as models that group members could look to for inspiration. The sessions typically closed with a relaxation exercise as a vehicle for transitioning from the group to their everyday activities. Group sessions were loosely divided between presentation of content and processing of material. Participants were asked to read assigned articles and respond to reflection questions in a journal between sessions. Most sessions included discussion of these journal entries.

The topics for each meeting were ordered in a sequence intended to foster the development of the group as-a-whole as well as the White anti-racism identity of each participant. The purpose of session one was to begin to develop group cohesion and trust, and to establish a contract with ground rules for creating an anti-oppression atmosphere. Session two introduced participants to the process of White identity development. Sessions three and four examined systematic racism, providing opportunities to begin or continue linking 'the personal to the political.' Session five encouraged participants to support one another in working through feelings of guilt, anger, and shame. Sessions six and seven focused on strategies for interrupting racism in the larger society. Please see Table 2 for specific topics, readings, and reflection questions for each session.

The groupworker who facilitated the pilot study did not hold any additional academic or extra-curricular authority over group participants. The group leader had a background in feminist theory and societal power structures. She worked as a program coordinator at the Center for Student Diversity for one semester prior to conducting the pilot group. The curricular model was developed by the groupworker at the request of and with consultation from Center staff.

Table 2

Weekly topic, readings, and reflection questions

---

*Session One: Foundations for Anti-Racism Community*

'Embracing a Cross-Racial Dialogue' by Beverly Daniel Tatum

(Chapter ten from *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria*)

What motivates you to learn about issues of racial injustice?

---

*Session Two: White Identity Development*

'From White Racist to White Anti-Racist' by Tema Okun

When did you realize you were White? Where are you in your own process of White identity development?

---

*Session Three: The History of Whiteness*

'Uncovering a Hidden History' by Shelly Tochluk (Chapter three from *Witnessing Whiteness: First steps toward an antiracist practice and culture*)

Reflect on your family history as it relates to your family's experience of Whiteness. When did your family become White? What ways did they, or have they, experienced their race and ethnicity? In what ways is their experience different from and/or similar to your individual experience of race and ethnicity?

---

*Session Four: Racism as Systematic*

'White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack' by Peggy McIntosh

Journal about how you react to your Whiteness on a daily basis. Describe your experiences of being consciously White. Come up with at least ten examples of how being White is part of your lived experience.

---

*Session Five: Self-Reflection and Working through Guilt*

'The Egalitarian Brain' by David Amodio

Has your experience of White privilege ever had a detrimental impact on relationships with people that you value? Has your experience of White privilege ever limited your self-awareness? Reflect on one or more times when this was the case. What have you learned since then?

---

*Session Six: Identifying Racial Micro-aggression*

'How White People Can Serve as Allies to People of Color in the Struggle to End Racism' by Paul Kivel

What have your experiences with racial micro-aggression, from a position of White privilege, made you feel like? When you have witnessed racism, what was that experience like? If you have attempted to interrupt or 'call out' racism, what was that like for you? What have you learned since then?

---

*Session Seven: Turning Knowledge into Action*

'Resistance' by Tim Wise (Chapter four from *White Like Me*)

What is the most important thing you have learning from participating in the White Identity Development and Anti-Racism Training?

---

## **The pilot program**

Once the initial plans had been developed, the pilot program was implemented during the ensuing spring semester under the auspices of the University's Center for Student Diversity. Each session had specific learning objectives which are summarized in Table 3.

### *Session One*

Session one was entitled 'Foundation for Anti-Racism Community.' The purposes of this session were to begin fostering group cohesion, create a contractual agreement for group interactions, and establish a safe environment for future interactions. The group created and agreed upon a list of ground rules during the first session which included being an active listener, asking questions rather than confronting, speaking up if a comment made one uncomfortable, and arriving on time, prepared to participate in the group.

The leader recognized that while participants expected to find the group challenging, they needed to be assured of a supportive environment in which one need not feel ashamed or embarrassed. The sessions, therefore, took place in a comfortable, private, conveniently-located room and fostered what Dessel, Rogge, and Garlington (2006) define as intergroup dialogue work, where '[Participants] are encouraged to collaborate willingly, be vulnerable, and believe in the authenticity of all participants.' Group members seemed to approach the training with this mindset.

During week one, group members participated in introductions and several icebreakers. These included a 'name chant,' in which group members quickly passed a ball around the circle while saying their own name. It was followed by a ball toss game, in which participants called out the name of the person to whom they were about to toss the ball. Next, they participated in an exercise called 'common ground.' The participants split into two groups, where members were asked to identify traits that they shared in common and report this to the larger group. Finally, members were asked to write their personal goals for the training on a piece of paper. They inserted these papers into envelopes and were asked to seal the envelopes and write their names on them, so that the goals could be returned to the respective members at the end of the training.

Table 3

Weekly learning objectives

---

*Session One: Foundations for Anti-Racism Community*

Develop the skills needed for creating a safe space

Recognize oneself as a White person within a White context

Be able to use empathy and reframing as tools for self-awareness in increasing one's capacities as a White ally

---

*Session Two: White Identity Development*

Understand the stages of White identity development

Recognize emotions that influence stages of White identity development

Recognize oneself within the stages of White identity development

---

*Session Three: The History of Whiteness*

Recognize that Whiteness is a social construct invented with a political agenda

Gain basic knowledge about the history behind the concept of Whiteness

Situate one's family history within a history of Whiteness

---

*Session Four: Racism as Systematic*

Understand the concept of racism as systemic

Identify daily experiences of White privilege

Understand how one's daily experiences fit into larger systems

---

*Session Five: Self-Reflection and Working through Guilt*

Learn how to support fellow White allies in working through their own guilt

Gain greater understanding as to how one's experience is shared by others

Learn how to turn 'guilt into gratitude' and use the perspective of 'situated action' as tools for increasing self-awareness

---

*Session Six: Identifying Racial Micro-aggression*

Learn how to recognize a racial micro-aggression

Learn methods of interrupting systematic racism

Learn techniques for recognizing and interrupting racial micro-aggressions

---

*Session Seven: Turning Knowledge into Action*

Learn how to use knowledge from the training to further racial justice as part of a racially diverse community

Identify expectations for continued effort as a White racial justice ally

Identify additional resources and supports for continued work as a White racial justice ally

---

After a brief break, there was an explanation of binary systems of oppression, hierarchies in which a dichotomy is socially constructed with the effect of privileging one group at the expense of another. Next, there was a group activity in which members were asked to list different binary systems of oppression, such as gender, religion, age, and sexual orientation. The leader discussed how each system of oppression was equally worthy of attention; however, this training would focus on the topic of race. The leader introduced two cognitive tools aimed at supporting the group throughout the training: empathy and reframing. Using empathy, a White person can tap into personal experiences with oppression, or lack of privilege, in other areas of identity, as a means of relating to people-of-color. The second skill, 'reframing,' is a method of altering the way we view an experience. For example, 'Affirmative action prevents Whites from receiving equal opportunities,' could be reframed as, 'Affirmative action is an effort to address the fact that Whites have unearned advantages due to racism.'

### *Session Two*

Session two focused on the subject of White identity development. To begin this session, participants re-entered the group environment by repeating the ball toss game. Next, they played an interactive, cohesion-building game of 'interpersonal bingo' in which participants received a bingo card listing characteristics of participants and tried to place the names of the participants in the corresponding boxes. (The leader had designed these cards prior to the session.) Following these two experiential activities, the facilitator discussed how this type of training might raise issues of personal growth and/or stress for the participants, and explained that additional support was available through the University's Wellness Center. A guest counselor from the Wellness Center then described the Center and its services. Next, the group viewed a film entitled *The Color of Fear*, and participants shared a 'snap-shot reaction' or one-sentence response to the film. To close the session, the guest counselor led the students in a loving-kindness meditation, which allowed them to practise self-soothing through visualization and the cultivation of forgiveness towards self and others.

During sessions one and two, students were very receptive and engaged. Many students shared important and potentially vulnerable aspects of their identities as early as the first hour of the training. This

allowed the group to progress through the pre-affiliation stage quickly and easily (Garland, Jones & Kolodny, 1973), which could be attributed to the voluntary, self-selected membership of the group.

### *Session Three*

Session three, entitled, 'The history of Whiteness' featured a presentation by a guest speaker on systematic racism. The presentation explained how the social construct or perception of Whiteness, as Americans know it today, was historically invented with a political agenda. Participants were very engaged by the interactive presentation, with some shedding tears upon seeing the cover of a 1939 issue of Time Magazine proclaiming Hitler 'Man of the Year.' The presentation concluded with a more contemporary discussion about the race of an actor from the television show 'Glee,' a woman born in South Korea and adopted into a White-European American family at three months old.

This presentation was followed by an activity in which participants used an adapted sociogram exercise, a graphic drawing of the generational lineage of their families, to share when their families first became White European-Americans. This activity aimed to personalize the concept of a 'family history of Whiteness.' Group members individually created family trees which incorporated a 'family myth,' or one unspoken family rule, as well as one word descriptors for various individuals or branches of the family. The group members drew extensive charts. One participant was a refugee from Eastern Europe whose recent family was a victim of genocide; another had family members in the South whose ancestors were slave owners; and another participant's ancestry was literally traced back to the landing of the Mayflower in 1620. One group member, a first generation immigrant whose family came from Greece, found the exercise particularly challenging. The student had not yet discerned how her strong ethnic identity was connected to her experience of race. It was hoped that by creating and presenting sociograms, group members could begin to see the broader connections and to view themselves as members of a White racial group with diverse cultural influences.

### *Session Four*

Session four, entitled 'Racism as Systemic' featured a presentation by a guest speaker discussing the history of our criminal justice system. By

examining the criminal justice system, the speaker was able to convey the different levels on which racism has operated in the history of United States law enforcement and continues to do so. Participants were given pieces of paper describing specific historical moments of racial injustice, and were asked as a group to place them in chronological sequence. Group members had the chance to respond to the presentation, with one participant noting the racism that underlies the difference in penalties for possessing crack versus powder cocaine. By the end of this presentation, it was hoped that group members could better understand and appreciate that racism operates on a systemic level beyond the mere interactions of individuals.

Following the presentation, the leader asked group members to share examples of how they experienced Whiteness in their daily lives. The topic had been assigned as a journal question, and group members did an excellent job of identifying experiences of White privilege in their daily lives. One recognized that ease in obtaining employment was in part due to racial privilege. Another shared that her behaviors might easily have led to jail as a high school student if she had been a person-of-color. One group member noted that strangers on the bus would more often choose the neighboring empty space, as opposed to the one next to people-of-color. Group members were then asked to name possible examples of how racism was harmful to White people. This question was more challenging for the group. While some participants appeared to grasp the concept easily, others struggled to understand how this was possible. One student thought it overly indulgent to examine the effects of racism on White people. Yet, as a group, members were able to share pertinent examples. These included a general lack of cultural competency, feelings of being socially awkward in racially diverse settings, an incident of presumed class privilege due to racial privilege, and the premise that White women are arguably under-tested for some STDs by health providers. The supportive, trusting group atmosphere facilitated the development of intimacy, interpersonal learning, enhanced personal reflection, and permission to explore this challenging topic. There was no overt interpersonal conflict evidenced throughout the training.

#### *Session Five*

Session five, entitled 'Self-reflection and working through guilt,'

was devoted to discussing personal experiences with racial micro-aggressions, or those daily experiences of racism that collectively contribute to White privilege. This session opened with students reading quotes distributed by the leader addressing the subject of guilt in regard to racism. For example, a quotation by Tochluck (2008) read, 'To begin honestly, we must discuss what may be, for White people, the most challenging aspect of any discussion of race. We must deal with the terms *racist*, *racism*, and *systemic White supremacy*. We must also confront the fact that some people might ask us to associate those words with ourselves and our actions' (Tochluck, 2008). It was hoped that this quote in particular would validate and normalize any anxieties that student-participants felt about exploring personal experiences of perpetuating racism. Members responded by sharing personal examples of the relevance that the quotation held for them.

Group members were then asked to share examples of when systematic racism had limited their self-awareness or been detrimental to their relationships. One group member questioned the value of this discussion, distinguishing racism on the individual level from large-scale social change. The leader then challenged the group members to consider the relationships between individuals and institutions. She asked them to think about their career aspirations and to consider the connection between their roles in institutions and their ability to impact social systems.

The increased comfort and trust that had been developed by week five allowed for deeper and the more challenging exploration of racially problematic thought patterns in the here-and-now. The leader began by sharing a recent micro-aggression she had committed. To some of the members, this incident sounded relatively minor and did not appear to have a strong negative impact. Two members responded by insisting that the act had not been racist. The leader explained that although the action was well-intended and did not appear to cause offense, it could still be considered racist. This exchange highlighted the value of having a White European-American person lead the group in order to demonstrate how racism could be fostered by relatively benign actions and how Whites have a responsibility to acknowledge and learn from these actions. It also set the stage for another group member to share a personal experience that evoked feelings of vulnerability.

Next, one student shared the use of 'reframing' to understand

affirmative action. Initially, the student was bitter about not being accepted into Ivy League colleges, especially when compared to a Black woman, featured in the local newspaper, who had similar accomplishments but was admitted to these schools. The student explained that looking back, it was now easier to appreciate the role of affirmative action in balancing an unlevel playing field, and yet, on a personal level, she still struggled with this concept. The other students proceeded to share their own frustrations with affirmative action, especially as it applies to the college application process. One student asserted that it was the one situation in which race should not be taken into account. The leader posed some questions that challenged these assertions and, as a result, members shared their willingness to re-examine these views. The participants appeared to experience some sort of connection and solace around this shared experience. The leader followed up on this discussion by e-mailing articles regarding the role of affirmative action.

The leader provided the group with a few strategies to help work through 'White guilt' in order to promote personal growth and social change. For instance, they were told how 'turning guilt into gratitude' is a way of valuing the things that we have in our lives to be thankful for and that can help us to maintain our anti-racism efforts, rather than simply experiencing guilt (Van Dernoot Lipsky, 2009). Members were also invited to think about 'situated action,' or the ability to reach White people who would be more receptive to other Whites than to people-of-color. At the end of the session, participants received 'racial justice Tic-tacs,' Tic-tacs with the original label removed and replaced with one that read, 'Take one to move through guilt towards action.' These served as a humorous reminder for the need to transform guilt into positive social action.

#### *Between Sessions Five and Six*

Between sessions five and six, group members were asked to respond to a series of three questions as part of an asynchronous online discussion in which everyone sent an e-mail to the group at their own convenience during the week. This ensured that all group members obtained similar information regardless of attendance, which was anticipated to be lower during weeks five and six (due to pre-scheduled commitments). It also allowed participants who more comfortably expressed themselves in

writing to share their perspectives with the group. Members responded to the following questions: 1) For what reasons is it generally taboo for the average White person to 'call out' behaviors that we perceive as racist (especially with Whites that we respect or even love)? 2) What feelings would such behaviors provoke for you and/or other White people you know? 3) How does this White American cultural norm, of not addressing racism when it is occurring, prevent Whites from doing racial justice ally work? The three questions were an opportunity for participants to begin to understand the primary role of the White ally, which 'is not to help victims of racism, but to speak up against systems of oppression and challenge other Whites [sic.] to do the same' (Tatum, 1997).

This asynchronous online exercise gave students the opportunity to learn from one another and to share their ideas without feeling put on the spot. It was a space in which group members explored the link between their emotions around racism and their ability to interrupt racial micro-aggressions. This interactive online component seemed well-received and was a valuable aspect of the training model, providing an opportunity to explore the link between one's emotions regarding racism and one's ability to interrupt racial micro-aggression.

#### *Session Six*

Session six, entitled 'Identifying racial micro-aggression,' featured a guest presentation on the emotional impact of racial micro-aggressions regularly experienced by people-of-color. Following this presentation, the group engaged in a discussion about racial micro-aggressions. Group members were asked to share either an experience in which they interrupted a racial micro-aggression, or an awareness of someone else effectively interrupting a racial micro-aggression. By now, the group's trust and comfort had developed sufficiently to allow members to safely open up and share honestly about these risky actions. One group member shared an example of how she became aware of her own unconscious racial micro-aggressions. Two other participants shared personal experiences of calling out racism, both describing their actions as courageous. This open sharing led to a group discussion about strategies for effectively responding to racism in the future.

### *Session Seven*

'Turning knowledge into action,' the topic for session seven, picked up on the discussion of session six, addressing the limitations of personal change without a long-term effort to effect social change. Staff who had a role in supporting the training and students who had recently attended a White privilege conference were invited to join the group as guests for part of this final meeting. It was hoped that this presence would create a link to future resources by introducing the group to a larger, racially diverse community working on issues of anti-racism. This session included a 'White ethnic food potluck.' Group members were asked to bring a dish reflecting one of their ethnic heritages with additional White ethnic food ordered for the event. The guest speaker addressed the importance of having communities supportive of anti-racism while attempting to educate and impact our spheres of influence. Group members were encouraged to practise 'calling out' racism with trusted friends and family. At the end of the session, participants shared one or two personal commitments to furthering racial justice in their own lives while guests shared hopes and expectations for those completing the training.

The leader helped to conclude the group by providing a summary and review of the accomplishments of the group over the past seven weeks. She affirmed that leaving the group with unanswered questions was a testament to the growth of the members. The leader distributed gift bags that included a hand-written card acknowledging an individual member's strength and a quote by a Maori woman: 'If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then we can work together.' In order to facilitate future growth, the gift bags also included a checklist detailing the qualities of effective White racial justice advocates. Lastly, the gift bags contained an anti-racism travel mug which featured a humorous, neon-colored cartoon image that read 'Anti-Racism: A White on White Responsibility.' Activities of the final session were aimed at facilitating separation and helping individual members transition to continued action without the group's support.

## **Initial assessment**

The pilot group consisted of seven female university participants. All were traditional-age students (eighteen to twenty-two) with the exception of one graduate student member in her mid-twenties. The group was heterogeneous in many areas including year in school, academic area of study, home city/location, sexual orientation, religious affiliation, geographic home, and ethnic background. Three of the participants were psychology majors with the remaining four representing music, biology, political science and women's and gender studies. All participants began the training with at least a basic level of awareness about their own racial privilege. Many identified the goal of gaining increased skills to advocate for racial justice as a desired outcome of the group experience.

Data gathered through assessments on the pre- and post-test instruments as well as through process observations provided the basis for an initial assessment of the pilot group experience. Each of the instruments included two identical sections, with the post-test containing one additional open-ended question: What is the most important thing you have learned from participating in the White Identity Development and Anti-Racism Training? The first section asked each participant to rate their degree of understanding of seven different concepts. The seven concepts were: 1) white identity development, 2) whiteness as a political construct, 3) systematic racism, 4) racial micro-aggressions, 5) white privilege, 6) being a member of a white racial group and 7) being a white racial justice ally. For each statement, students selected one of the following four responses: 1 - completely understand, 2 - moderately understand, 3 - do not understand very well and 4 - do not understand at all. In the second section the students were asked to indicate their level of agreement with the following 7 statements: (1) I understand my identity and culture and the impact it has on my relationships with others, 2) I appreciate new ideas and cultures, 3) I do not suppress racist thoughts and instead find healthy ways of addressing them and unlearning racism, 4) I am confident in my ability to identify and interrupt racial micro-aggressions, 5) I am able to comfortably engage in respectful, constructive discussion of racial micro-aggressions with other white people, 6) I am able to identify exemplary white racial justice allied in history and in present times, and 7) I have the skills

to work through feelings of guilt and confusion in order to act in the interest of racial justice. They were asked to rate each statement from 1-5, where one meant strongly agree and 5 indicated strongly disagree. The individual scores for each question are presented in Tables 4 and 5.

The responses to the items on the first section of the post-test indicated that, on average, students demonstrated increased understanding for each of the seven statements. The average response to all statements was a three on the pre-test and a one on the post-test. The item that demonstrated the largest increase was the concept 'Whiteness as a Political Construct.' Every student indicated a higher level of agreement with all seven statements in the post-test when compared to the pre-test responses. The overall average of the differences in the second part of the surveys was one point. For the pre-test the average response was two while in the post-test the overall average was one. The largest growth was in response to the statement 'I appreciate new ideas and cultures.' Please see Table 1 for responses to specific items.

It was anticipated that students would gain valuable knowledge to

Table 4  
Pre- and post-test results: Understanding concepts

To what degree do you understand the following concepts? (1= high/4 = low)									
Concepts	Student Responses								Mean
White identity development	Pre	3	2	1	3	2	2	3	2.29
	Post	2	1	1	1	1	2	1	1.29
Whiteness as a political construct	Pre	2	4	4	4	2	2	3	3.00
	Post	1	2	1	1	1	1	1	1.14
Systematic racism	Pre	2	2	1	2	2	3	3	2.14
	Post	2	1	1	1	1	2	1	1.29
Racial micro-aggressions	Pre	3	3	4	4	2	2	2	2.86
	Post	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	1.14
White privilege	Pre	2	3	3	3	3	2	2	2.57
	Post	2	1	1	2	2	1	1	1.43
Being a member of a white racial group	Pre	2	3	2	4	2	2	2	2.43
	Post	1	2	1	2	1	1	1	1.29
Being a white racial justice ally	Pre	3	3	2	4	2	2	3	2.71
	Post	2	2	1	2	1	2	2	1.71

support their individual processes of white identity development and social activism. The pre and post surveys did indicate an increase in students' knowledge and awareness of opportunities for interrupting systematic racism. Within the pilot group session, participants demonstrated increased understanding of White privilege by effectively identifying instances of White privilege in their daily lives. They articulated connections between individual actions and larger social institutions, identifying opportunities to advocate for racial justice. One participant remarked,

*Through this training I have learned about the effects of racism on an individual, group, and systematic level. . . Not only has this program helped me to work beyond guilt and towards action, but it has also given me the determination to start anti-racism initiatives within my [campus] and home communities.*

Table 5  
Pre- and post-test results: Personal agreement with statements

Number that best indicates your level of agreement with the following statements (1 = agree/ 5 = disagree)									
Statements	Student responses								Mean
I understand my identity and culture and the impact it has on my relationships with others.	Pre	1	1	1	1	2	5	3	2.00
	Post	1	1	1	2	1	2	1	1.29
I appreciate new ideas and cultures.	Pre	4	1	3	4	4	4	3	3.29
	Post	1	1	2	1	1	2	1	1.29
I do not suppress racist thoughts and instead find healthy ways of addressing them and un-learning racism.	Pre	1	1	2	4	1	4	1	2.00
	Post	1	1	2	1	1	2	1	1.29
I am confident in my ability to identify and interrupt racial micro-aggressions.	Pre	3	1	2	2	1	5	1	2.14
	Post	2	1	1	2	2	2	1	1.57
I am able to comfortably engage in respectful, constructive discussion of racial micro-aggressions with other White people.	Pre	2	1	2	2	2	4	3	2.29
	Post	2	1	2	2	2	2	1	1.71

Furthermore, students demonstrated increased knowledge about the history of Whiteness and were able to situate their families within that history. Participants demonstrated an increase in their understanding of Whiteness as a social construct. They recognized that the concept of Whiteness was created with a political agenda, and that their ancestors at some point became White European-Americans. One group member explained, 'By further understanding my Whiteness and my White heritage, I feel that I can better communicate ideas of race and oppression to those that share my racial identity as well as express my commitment to anti-racism to those who are not my race.' Such comments support the achievement of one of the primary objectives of the training – the development of the participants' White identities.

With regard to values, many group members indicated a greater commitment to anti-racism social change efforts. During the last session of the training, participants shared one or two goals for furthering racial justice in their lives. One group member, employed by the university as a Resident Advisor, planned to do additional outreach to residents-of-color during the upcoming school year. Another committed to discussing issues of racism with a parent. Students also demonstrated growth in the areas of personal awareness and self-acceptance. It is not uncommon for Whites who are opposed to racism to reject a racial identity altogether. However, as one participant stated, 'I now know that it is very important for me to try to be myself and not to be ashamed of being White.' Another group member gained greater comfort and ability to discuss racism, stating, 'I have learned that it's okay to talk about racism in a way that benefits everyone, and that talking about it will improve knowledge and decrease White ignorance of the oppressions people-of-color face.'

In the area of skills development, the group members acquired specific tools that allowed them to advocate for racial justice. Some of these skills were cognitive-behavioral techniques in which students learned how to reframe their own thought patterns. For example, during session five, two students who initially expressed opposition to affirmative action, later spoke about their willingness to re-examine these views. Students also demonstrated new interpersonal capabilities. During session six, participants consulted with one another about strategies for interrupting racism in their daily lives. One introverted participant shared that, 'It is very easy to keep my beliefs to myself, but in

order to be a racial justice ally, I must speak up and take risks in order to help make a difference.’ Another group member, whose social networks almost exclusively represented people-of-color, learned the importance of engaging in conversation with other Whites: ‘I realized that I was unable to truly become a White ally until I engaged in conversation about race and ethnicity with White individuals [sic].’ Both students were able to identify new ways of promoting racial justice in their lives.

## **Discussion and Recommendations**

This model, implemented as a pilot project, appears to have potential for facilitating anti-racism identity. It aimed to enhance participants’ knowledge, values, and skills with regard to racial justice advocacy. The training sought to empower students who were ready and willing to exert a greater anti-racism impact upon their campus community. Since this was a self-selected group, it seems logical that these students would be more open and knowledgeable than the typical undergraduate student. However, while they may have had greater intellectual knowledge about racism, they still lacked skills and resources to effect change among their peers and communities.

With regard to the objectives for the training, it appears that some success was achieved. At the outset of the group, participants were largely unaware of their own abilities to influence and promote racial justice advocacy. By the end of the training, all participants were exposed to new perspectives, strategies, and skills for interrupting racism and promoting racial justice. Students acquired new skills to explain systematic racism, situate their families within the historical construct of Whiteness, and relate personal experiences with White privilege. They were introduced to White racial justice allies with whom they were previously unfamiliar. By virtue of their ongoing participation in a formal White anti-racism group, participants became increasingly conscious of their membership in a White racial group and the opportunities to develop anti-racist identities. Group members achieved the goal of engaging in respectful, constructive discussions of racial micro-aggression during sessions five and six. While none of the group members were well-acquainted with one another prior to the training, they demonstrated interpersonal skills for building relationships with

White racial justice allies by creating a supportive environment for one another. Finally, during session seven, when participants shared personal goals for continuing work in this area, participants identified and committed to ongoing, meaningful anti-racist activities.

Although the sample for this practice-evaluation is limited to a pilot group with seven participants, data suggest that the potential of the model warrants replication. The social work profession is committed to being at the forefront of social justice, and this model could contribute to its efforts to promote racial justice. The model goes beyond a basic education about the oppression of people-of-color and addresses issues of White guilt and the subtleties of racism in daily life; it challenges Whites to recognize, reflect upon, and educate others about the harm that racism inflicts upon White European-Americans.

### **Recommendations**

Based upon this pilot group experience, recommendations for replication include:

- Expand the length of each session from two hours to two-and-a-half or three hours, and the number of sessions from seven to ten. This additional time would provide opportunities for developing long-term change and allow for critical topics and personal responses to be explored in greater depth.
- Add a session or module early in the training about how racism harms White people, distinguishing harm to Whites from systematic oppression of people-of-color. Within the pilot, there was inadequate time and attention given to this important premise.
- Include the topic of affirmative action as part of the curriculum of session five. When group members raised the subject during this session, it proved to be a very rich and meaningful topic for participants.
- Add a session or module on intersecting oppressed identities. It can be especially challenging for White students with additional oppressed identities, such as class, gender, sexual orientation, or religion, to separate and appreciate unique aspects of racism.
- Add a module or session devoted to the application of participants' new understandings of racism to their own campus environments.

Provide statistics about racial-ethnic data on participants' home campuses.

- Be aware of the university calendar when scheduling the training sessions. For example, given the pressure of the final weeks of class, it could improve attendance to conclude the group several weeks before the end of the semester.
- Add video and audio materials to the curriculum as an alternative to guest speakers, if guest speakers are unavailable.

## **Conclusion**

This group model appears to have the potential for impacting and encouraging growth and change. It harnesses the power of effective groupwork to facilitate the understanding that racism is unhealthy for all individuals, not just people-of-color. The group training model places responsibility for resisting racism in the hands of White European-Americans and provides them with the resources to fulfill this responsibility. Learning about anti-racism from and with one's peers within a safe, educational context, allows for a less defensive, more open response to this sensitive issue. Moreover, offering this structured training to college undergraduate students, a population more prone to self-reflection and personal assessment, provides a vital opportunity for influencing and potentially interrupting the cycle of racism. The pilot group discussed in this paper appears to have facilitated meaningful reflection and change for its members. Replication of this model would provide additional opportunities to assess its value and impact.

## **Acknowledgements**

Special thanks to Javier Cervantes, Jason Chan, Benjamin Harris, Andrea Mondragon, Gaby Ortiz, Shykira Richards and Nichole Smith for their ongoing consultation and expertise during the development of this curriculum. Thanks also to Sharon Chia Claros for linking the group facilitator with the Center for the purposes of this program. Additional thanks to Dianna Stencil for her consultation on the use of mindfulness techniques, Art Munin for his consultation on developing

the final session, and Elizabeth Ramirez for her assistance in data analysis. Susan Grossman's feedback and suggestions for drafts of this paper are also gratefully acknowledged. The contributions and support from each of these colleagues were invaluable.

## References

- Akintunde, O. (1999) White racism, White supremacy, White privilege and the social construction of race. *Multicultural Education*, 7, 2, 2-8
- Berman-Rossi, T. (1993) The tasks and skills of the social worker across stages of group development. *Social Worker Stages of Group Development*, 16, 1/2, 69-82
- Bernstein, S. (1973) *Explorations in group work: Essays in theory and practice*. Boston, MA: Milford House
- Dessel, A., Rogge, M. & Garlington, S. (2006) Using intergroup dialogue to promote social justice and change. *Social Work*, 51, 4, 303-315
- Drumm, K. (2006) The essential power of group work. *Social Work with Groups*, 29, 2/3, 17-31
- Garland, J., Jones, H. & Kolodny, R. (1973) A model for stages of development in social work groups. in S. Bernstein (Ed.) *Explorations in group work: Essays in theory and practice* Boston, MA: Milford House (pp. 17-71)
- Helms, J. E. (1992) *A race is a nice thing to have: A guide to being a White person or understanding the White persons in your life*. Topeka, Kansas: Content Communications
- Kendall, F. E. (2006) *Understanding White privilege: Creating pathways to authentic relationships across race*. New York: Routledge
- Magen, R. (2009) Cognitive-Behavioral. in A. Gitterman & R. Salmon (Eds.) *Encyclopedia of Social Work with Groups*. New York: Routledge (pp. 25-47)
- Monkman, M. (1991) Outcome objectives in social work practice: person and environment. *Social Work*, 36, 3, 253-258
- Okun, T. (n.d.) *From White racist to White anti-racist: A life-long journey* [PDF document]. [Accessed 3 November 2010 at [http://www.cswsworkshop.org/pdfs/CARC/White\\_Identity/4\\_Life\\_Long\\_Journey.PDF](http://www.cswsworkshop.org/pdfs/CARC/White_Identity/4_Life_Long_Journey.PDF)]
- Tatum, B. D. (1997) *'Why are all the Black kids sitting together in the cafeteria?' and other conversations about race*. New York: Basic Books
- Tochluk, S. (2008) *Witnessing Whiteness: First steps toward an antiracist practice and culture*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Education

- Toseland, R. W. & Rivas, R. F. (2012) *An introduction to group work practice* (6<sup>th</sup> ed.). Needham, Massachusetts: Allyn & Bacon/Pearson
- Van Dernoot Lipsky, L. (2009) *Trauma stewardship: An everyday guide to caring for self while caring for others*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers
- Wise, T. (2010) *Colorblind: The rise of post-racial politics and the retreat from racial equity*. San Francisco, CA: City Lights Books
- Yalom, I. D. (2005) *The theory and practice of group psychotherapy* (5<sup>th</sup> ed.). New York: Basic Books