



2019

Strengths So White: Interrogating StrengthsQuest Education Through a Critical Whiteness Lens

Nicholas Tapia-Fuselier
University of North Texas

Lauren Irwin
University of Southern California

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ecommons.luc.edu/jcshesa>



Part of the [Educational Leadership Commons](#), [Higher Education Commons](#), [Leadership Studies Commons](#), [Politics and Social Change Commons](#), and the [Student Counseling and Personnel Services Commons](#)

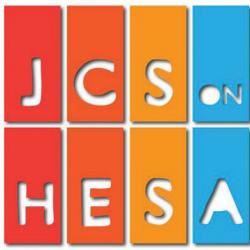
Recommended Citation

Tapia-Fuselier, N. & Irwin, L. (2019). Strengths so White: Interrogating StrengthsQuest education through a critical Whiteness lens. *Journal of Critical Scholarship on Higher Education and Student Affairs*, 5(1), 30-44.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals and Magazines at Loyola eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of Critical Scholarship on Higher Education and Student Affairs* by an authorized administrator of Loyola eCommons. For more information, please contact ecommons@luc.edu.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License](#).



Volume 5, Issue 1

Journal of Critical Scholarship on Higher Education and Student Affairs

Strengths So White

Interrogating StrengthsQuest Education Through a Critical Whiteness Lens

Nicholas Tapia-Fuselier & Lauren Irwin

— Abstract —

Many college student leadership programs utilize StrengthsQuest as a tool for individual and group development. Although StrengthsQuest is touted as a universal tool to help all individuals leverage their strengths in varied settings, the authors are critical of both the tool itself and the ways educators utilize StrengthsQuest. This paper employs tenets of critical Whiteness theory, including color evasiveness, normalization, and solipsism, to deconstruct StrengthsQuest within the context of leadership education. Additionally, the authors offer possibilities for reimagining StrengthsQuest education in ways that center inclusion and justice. Finally, strategies for critical leadership educators are discussed.

Keywords: leadership education; student affairs; critical whiteness theory

ISSN 2377-1306

© 2019

All rights reserved for the authors of this study. Journal of Critical Scholarship on Higher Education and Student Affairs is an open access journal and all pages are available for copying and distribution under a Creative Commons Attribution/Non-Commercial/No Derivative works license. Any authorized work must be properly attributed to the author(s). Work cannot be used for commercial means or changed in any way.

We wonder about what would happen to ethnic and cultural divisions if everyone first knew each other in terms of their talents and strengths.... We admit we don't know the answers. But we are sure that the differences would be substantial, and we believe that they would be overwhelmingly positive (Clifton, Anderson, & Schreiner, 2006, p. 57).

As institutions work to advance their student success goals, leadership development programs and initiatives can be found in more places on campus than ever before, particularly across student affairs (Komives, 2011). Leadership education is evolving to include more complex conceptualizations of leadership; part of this evolution is an emphasis on program design (Munin & Dugan, 2011). Munin and Dugan (2011) compel leadership educators to consider how issues of power, privilege, and marginalization show up in leadership development programs on campus. However, there are still serious gaps in the college student leadership development literature around race and racism's influence on and connection to leadership development (Dugan, 2011; Ospina & Foldy, 2009).

There are a number of philosophical and theoretical approaches to leadership education including person-centered, group-centered, relationship-centered, and justice-based leadership (Dugan, 2017). Strengths-based leadership education is an approach that strengthens awareness of individual talents (Soria, Roberts, & Reinhard, 2015). This kind of self-awareness is a core component of many leadership development programs. An aspect of the social change model of leadership development, one of the most prevalent college student leadership models (Kezar, Carducci, & Contreras-McGavin, 2006), includes consciousness of one's own values, beliefs, emotions, and skills (Early & Fincher, 2017). Therefore, it is not surprising that increasing students' awareness of their strengths has become a priority for many campuses.

StrengthsQuest, otherwise known as Clifton-

Strengths or StrengthsFinder, has been one tool employed to meet this goal. StrengthsQuest is a Gallup-created tool for strengths-based leadership education used on over 600 college campuses in diverse programmatic settings including career services, student employee training, academic advising, academic skill building, team development, and leadership development (Gallup, n.d.-b). Although many campuses find that StrengthsQuest is a useful tool for student leadership development, this approach needs critical examination. The introductory quote of this paper, taken from the Gallup textbook, *StrengthsQuest: Discover and Develop Your Strengths in Academics, Career and Beyond*, is alarming. Strengths-based leadership education that poses an erasure of "ethnic and cultural differences" as a possible future is rooted in a White supremacist ideology that is color evasive, normalizes hegemonic Whiteness, and promotes solipsism.

There is a nascent body of literature that critically examines Whiteness among college students, collectively known as critical Whiteness studies (CWS). Notably, DiAngelo's (2011) article on White fragility and Cabrera's (2017) piece on White immunity described the ways that White individuals insulate themselves from explorations of White racial privilege and perpetuate White supremacy out of fear of discomfort. Cabrera, Franklin, and Watson (2016) summarized existing literature on Whiteness in higher education, demonstrating the need for further explorations of Whiteness in critical ways in order to dismantle White supremacy in higher education. There is a dearth in the literature on the critical examination of Whiteness in leader identity development, leadership theory, and leadership practice. Further, there are no published studies that critique strengths-based leadership utilizing critical Whiteness.

Dugan (2017) wrote about the necessity to deconstruct and reconstruct leadership theories in order to address inequities and gaps in existing theories and practices. In this article, our aim is to engage in the deconstruction and reconstruction of StrengthsQuest. To this end, we consider all aspects of StrengthsQuest

including the tool itself, common facilitation practices, and its place in the larger leadership development context. The purpose of our article is twofold: to deconstruct StrengthsQuest utilizing critical Whiteness as a theoretical framework; and to offer a reconstruction of StrengthsQuest that acknowledges and disrupts White ideals and White supremacy. Implications for research and practice are included.

Literature Review

The practice of student leadership development has grown on college campuses along with the research. Astin (1993) is often credited as one of the first scholars to examine leadership development as an outcome of attending college (Dugan, 2011). Since this study, the scholarship on college student leadership development has grown to recognize that leadership is not a “singularly defined or universalistic” phenomenon (Kezar, 2002, p. 96). This recognition requires scholars to investigate the ways social identities influence leadership development. Moreover, this necessitates leadership educators and researchers to turn their gaze onto the commonly-used tools of leadership development, like StrengthsQuest. Munin and Dugan (2011) wrote that leadership programs must embrace inclusive design meant to “recognize, incorporate, and engage marginalized student populations” (p. 157). Inclusive design practices necessitate an intentional construction of leadership development programs by thinking deeply about power and privilege and addressing marginalization and discrimination (Munin & Dugan, 2011). Additionally, there must be careful consideration of the implicit messages that are communicated through leadership development programs (Munin & Dugan, 2011). For instance, if part of a leadership development experience requires students to complete an assessment, the facilitators have a responsibility to consider how that assessment and subsequent pedagogy accounts for systemic privilege and oppression.

StrengthsQuest

StrengthsQuest, born out of the positive psychology tradition, emphasizes assets over deficits. There are noted concerns about positive psychology worth addressing before describing StrengthsQuest and its application in leadership education. Miller (2008) examined the fallacies within positive psychology, one of which is the practice of “associat[ing] mental health with a particular personality type: a cheerful, outgoing, goal-driven, status-seeking extravert” (p. 591). Others, like Sundararajan (2005), highlighted the “culturally encapsulated value judgements behind positive psychology” (p. 35). Positive psychology is far from universal; it is rooted in western traditions of individualism and utilitarianism. Further, the notion that simply expressing one’s positive traits is not only the key to well-being but also the key to achieving one’s goals is inherently false because goal conception is inextricably linked to social status (Miller, 2008). It is difficult to separately identify strengths from life because individuals’ values, beliefs, and experiences constitute both life and strengths (Miller, 2008). Finally, positive psychology upholds neoliberal discourses by privileging and classifying particular ways of being and functioning as strengths (McDonald & O’Callaghan, 2008).

Despite the limitations of positive psychology, StrengthsQuest has become a popular approach that is being used on more than 600 campuses (Gallup, n.d.-b). Born out of the positive psychology tradition that emphasizes assets over deficits (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), Gallup’s CliftonStrengths centers a person’s strengths and natural talents in the leadership process. The StrengthsFinder assessment emerged as a tool to help individuals identify their naturally occurring talents. By helping individuals identify and invest in their talents, those talents would become strengths—meaning they could be used in almost any setting for near-perfect performance (Gallup, n.d.-a). Over time, the StrengthsFinder assessment and corresponding StrengthsQuest education grew as a tool for both individual and team development.

Within higher education, Gallup's StrengthsQuest is an assessment used in a variety of capacities, including first-year seminar courses, formal leadership programs, career exploration programs, retention initiatives, and more (Gallup, n.d.-b). Traditionally, a student is introduced to StrengthsQuest through the online assessment. Upon completing the assessment, a student receives a report with their top five talent themes. Although there are 34 talent themes, and individuals possess talent in all 34 themes, the report highlights the student's top five. These top five talent themes represent the student's most naturally occurring strength themes. The 34 talent themes fall into four domain categories: Executing, Influencing, Relationship Building, and Strategic Thinking (Gallup, n.d.-c). For example, *Discipline* is a talent theme that describes the desire for structure and the inclination to create orderly plans in order to get tasks achieved (Gallup, n.d.-a); Discipline falls in the Executing domain. After a student learns their top five, they are likely to go through various activities, workshops, or seminars to enhance their understanding of their strengths and create action plans to operationalize their strengths in a variety of contexts including coursework, organizational leadership, and career preparation.

Despite StrengthsQuest being a widely used and popular tool for strengths-based leadership on college campuses, there are notable concerns to consider. Rath and Conchie (2008) introduced the term strengths-based leadership. However, as Dugan (2017) concluded, their introduction of the term lacked a theoretical foundation and a clear understanding of the term. In any case, strengths-based leadership persists as a common tool in college student leadership development programs. Additionally, there are issues of research credibility that must be accounted for (Dugan, 2017). Although Gallup publishes research reports on StrengthsQuest, these reports are not vetted through a peer-review process; rather, they are mere proprietary productions of Gallup, a for-profit company (Dugan, 2017). In a field that privileges theory-to-practice principles (Carpenter & Haber-Curran, 2013;

Haber-Curran & Owen, 2013; Kimball & Ryder, 2014), student affairs professionals should be critical of the popularized use of StrengthsQuest.

Tools of Deconstruction and Reconstruction

At face value, StrengthsQuest is a valuable tool for individual and group development within leadership education. However, simply accepting tools at face value often leads to common practices that privilege dominant identities and experiences. Therefore, to engage in a critical examination of StrengthsQuest, we rely on Dugan's (2017) application of critical perspectives on leadership theory that calls for deconstruction and reconstruction.

Importantly, the tenets of CWS is the lens through which we deconstruct and reconstruct StrengthsQuest. At its core, deconstructing and reconstructing a theory necessitates "letting go of theoretical certainty" (Dugan, 2017, p. 30). Put another way, we must have "deep engagement with fallibilism as an epistemological approach" (Stewart, 2010, p. 304). Deconstruction requires us to acknowledge and challenge false binaries and normative assumptions in order to develop more complex understandings of tools and theories (Dugan, 2017). In this paper, we are challenging normative assumptions that are based in White supremacy. To be sure, deconstruction moves beyond critique. It situates critique in imagining new possibilities; this is reconstruction (Dugan, 2017). Practicing deconstruction without reconstruction leaves us in a state of deficit and dismissal; coupling deconstruction with reconstruction is essential for moving from critique to change.

Dugan (2017) presents four tools of deconstruction. *Ideological critique* seeks to investigate the underlying assumptions and beliefs that inform a theory. *Commodification* pays attention to principles of capitalism that are embedded in a theory or model. *Willful blindness* describes peoples' choice to remain unaware of or avoid unpacking difficult, latent issues in a theory for the sake of convenience. Finally, theoretical critiques must include an examination of *Flow*

of power. In order to thoroughly name and critically examine the ways that StrengthsQuest upholds White supremacy in leadership education, we will utilize tenets of CWS as the lens through which we deconstruct StrengthsQuest.

Additionally, four tools of reconstruction are presented to facilitate the imagining and implementation of new possibilities (Dugan, 2017). *Disrupting normativity* is “perhaps the most powerful way to address issues that arise from ideological critique and willful blindness” (Dugan, 2017, p. 47). *Attending to power* as it is conceptualized in a theory is critical. *Cultivating agency* either individually or collectively is needed to reconstruct theory. Finally, *Building interest convergence* is the process of coalition building by showing mutual, shared benefit; this can be pragmatically useful in critical reconstruction processes. The tools of reconstruction will be applied to reimagine possibilities for more just and equitable applications of StrengthsQuest education.

Theoretical Framework

Although Whiteness is both a skin color and an institution, for the purpose of this article, we focus on Whiteness as an institution (Cabrera et al., 2016). Whiteness can be seen as a form of cultural capital or way of seeing and framing the world; within this definition, White people and people of color can engage in Whiteness (Cabrera et al., 2016; Liu & Baker, 2016). Whiteness as an institution rewards White people and those who assimilate and engage in White discourses, creating a system that people of all races may choose to participate in. It is in this way that Whiteness can be seen as a form of cultural capital—a practice or knowledge to acquire (Cabrera et al., 2016). Scholars list different theoretical components of critical Whiteness including colorblindness, epistemologies of ignorance or solipsism, ontological expansiveness, property, and assumed racial comfort (Cabrera et al., 2016). In this paper, we utilize the term color evasive rather than colorblind in order to employ language that is more inclusive and accurate.

Color evasiveness better describes the active practice by which individuals refuse to see or engage with race (Annamma, Jackson, & Morrison, 2017). In order to fully deconstruct StrengthsQuest as a tool that reifies White supremacy in leadership education, we apply the tenets of color evasiveness, normalization, and solipsism with tools of deconstruction to critically examine StrengthsQuest education.

Color evasiveness seeks to ignore race by treating all people “equally” regardless of their racial identity or skin color. A commitment to color evasiveness is dangerous because it allows individuals and systems to remain willfully ignorant to the real violence of racism. Given the ways that Whiteness operates as a system and institution, people of color may also practice color evasiveness as a form of assimilation to White supremacist worldviews. By adhering to a color evasive ideology, people or systems will frame racial inequality as being caused by anything besides racism, thus privileging Whiteness (Cabrera et al., 2016).

Normalization is closely related to color evasiveness and is often an outcome of color evasive ideology. Because color evasiveness demonstrates willful ignorance of race and racialized experiences, normalization conceptualizes the White racialized experience as essential (Liu & Baker, 2016). When Whiteness is normalized, the lived experiences of people of color are silenced and ignored; the normalization of Whiteness creates and upholds systems of White supremacy. Again, people of color may also engage in practices that normalize Whiteness, given the pervasive, systemic, and endemic nature of White supremacy. Practices that normalize Whiteness and remain willfully ignorant to the violence of color evasiveness are enhanced by individuals’ solipsistic worldviews.

Solipsism is the idea that one’s own experience is all that can be known. In other words, solipsism functions as a form of epistemological ignorance (Sullivan, 2006). When Whiteness is normalized, tools and educational opportunities are designed with White people in mind, remaining willfully ignorant to the experiences and needs of people of color.

It is important that we are clear in our intention of using CWS as a theoretical framework. It is not to perpetuate a covert centering of Whiteness that can already be found in the leadership education literature. Rather, it is to critically interrogate Whiteness as an institution with the goal of creating or reimaging tools and educational practices, such as StrengthsQuest education, that are more inclusive and just.

Positionality and Critical Reflexivity

Positionality is a necessary tool in qualitative research that acknowledges the researcher's identities, values, and ideals that influence the research process (Hesse-Biber, 2017). Although we are not engaging in a qualitative research study, we believe it is important that we acknowledge our positionality to this project. Over time, we have become critical of the ways in which the StrengthsQuest assessment and traditional StrengthsQuest activity facilitation are utilized as an identity-neutral tool. We argue that ignoring socialization and social location in leadership development perpetuates normative, White ideals and upholds White supremacy. It is important that we acknowledge that we did not arrive at this argument initially. Whiteness, both as a skin color and as a discourse, made it easy for us to uncritically buy into StrengthsQuest as a tool as well as our own top five StrengthsQuest talent themes. However, as justice-oriented scholar-activists, we are committed to the lifelong work of interrogating whether we are upholding or disrupting White supremacy in our actions.

As we began to discuss and write about this topic theoretically, we found it important to engage in critical reflexivity, which Hesse-Biber (2017) describes as an "understanding of the diversity and complexity of one's own social location" (p. 45). Both authors are White doctoral students with student affairs backgrounds who have utilized StrengthsQuest as a leadership development tool in a variety of institutional and programmatic contexts. Our critical reflexivity process consisted of both formal and informal self-re-

flexion (Dugan, 2017). Informally, we had discussions about the ways in which Whiteness influenced our buy-in to StrengthsQuest and approaches to facilitating StrengthsQuest-related activities for students. Formally, our reflection process included free-writing as well as structured reflection with the following prompts:

- 1) What are our top five talent themes and how do we understand the relationship between our talent themes and Whiteness?
- 2) In what ways have we seen Whiteness influence our experience(s) as a facilitator?
- 3) How are our identities (especially race) related to how we understand and facilitate StrengthsQuest education?

The reflection process allowed us to appropriately position ourselves in our thinking and writing of this piece. In this section, we share three themes found in our reflections.

First, there were similarities in the ways in which we unpacked meaning in our top five talent themes. For example, one of the first author's top five talent themes is *Self-Assurance*. *Self-Assurance* is described as a confidence in the ability to manage one's own life; there is an "inner compass" that one's decisions are right (Gallup, n.d.-a.) Upon critical reflection, this has a clear connection to normalization and solipsism. That is, White people are taught to believe that their decisions, beliefs, and worldviews are normal and are right. We must wonder how a White person's lived experience might influence this to be a top five talent theme. Similarly, one of the second author's top five talent themes is *Achiever*. In considering the lens of critical Whiteness, the *Achiever* talent theme clearly connects to color evasiveness and notions of meritocracy. The *Achiever* talent centers accomplishment and achievement as a reward in and of itself (Gallup, n.d.-a.). Growing up in a White, middle-class family, the second author reflected on her parents' emphasis on hard work, especially in school, as being the key to success; they believed that few obstacles were insurmountable by hard work.

Second, our reflections included recognition of the ways our talent themes, when deployed, show up in context. That is, the actions and behaviors driven by our talent themes are not isolated from our bodies; they are innately tied to our bodies and impact the space, and people, around us. For example, the first author reflected on his talent theme of *Input*. Input is described as a craving to know more (Gallup, n.d.-a.). Because of this, people with Input as a top talent theme want to collect and archive lots of information. However, it is not the sole strength of Input that leads people to seek knowledge. Instead, the first author's experience of being from a White, educated, middle-class background has led him to have access to spaces where his desire to learn more is seen, affirmed, and cultivated. As the second author noted in her reflection, "as a White person, I show up in spaces with visible racial privilege."

Finally, the other major theme found across our reflections is our evolution as StrengthsQuest facilitators. The first author recalled being excited to begin facilitating StrengthsQuest sessions as this was hugely influential in his own leadership development. It was during facilitating a session as a part of a six-week leadership workshop series when excitement turned to critical curiosity. Before the StrengthsQuest workshop, the prior week's workshop was on identity, privilege, and oppression. Yet, identity, privilege, and oppression were completely absent from our group's conversations about StrengthsQuest. How could this be? This experience led to some honest reflection and an intentional redesign of StrengthsQuest sessions for the first author. The second author reflected on being a StrengthsQuest facilitator on a predominantly White campus, noting that "Whiteness, as both a skin color and discourse, was omnipresent as I facilitated." The work of disrupting White ideals in a given session required intention, effort, and collaboration with other colleagues in order to engage students in critical analyses of StrengthsQuest. Part of this meant working to unseat students' blind acceptance of StrengthsQuest as fact, challenge students to see and disrupt normal-

ized Whiteness in their lives, and give students permission to disagree with their top five talent themes.

Deconstructing StrengthsQuest Education

Considering StrengthsQuest's prevalence as a tool across higher education and in leadership education, we are critical of its use because it "fails to address issues of context and how social stratification and power may shape how strengths" operate (Dugan, 2017, p. 103). Critical Whiteness is a useful conceptual framework for our critical deconstruction of StrengthsQuest (Cabrera et al., 2016; Louis, 2012). In our deconstruction of StrengthsQuest, we rely on the tenets of CWS in our application of two of Dugan's (2017) tools of deconstruction: ideological critique and willful blindness.

Tenets of critical Whiteness fit nicely within the deconstruction practices of ideological critique and willful blindness. We employ concepts of color evasiveness, normalization, and solipsism to critically examine the underlying assumptions and beliefs of StrengthsQuest education and identify the ways that educators utilize and uphold White supremacy by failing to engage in critical analysis of StrengthsQuest (Dugan, 2017). We recognize that our lived experiences and positionality as authors influence the ways we deconstruct StrengthsQuest education. Therefore, we invite readers to challenge, question, and grapple with our offerings.

Color Evasiveness

StrengthsQuest education touts the universal nature of the assessment's results, claiming that the results of the StrengthsFinder assessment are applicable and relevant to all people, regardless of their identities (Clifton et al., 2006). However, this core assumption of universality is rooted in ideologies of color evasiveness.

By adhering to a universal or identity-neutral approach, the StrengthsFinder assessment and corresponding StrengthsQuest education uphold color evasiveness. Without considering the influence of identi-

ty on individual talent development, StrengthsQuest positions talents as universal. By creating a list of possible talents, based on an assessment that is more accurate for White people than people of color (Dugan, 2017), StrengthsQuest not only ignores race but also ignores the ways race shapes reality and lived experiences. Positioning StrengthsQuest talent themes as universal and focusing on individuals' abilities to develop and apply their talents ignore how talents may be differently understood or received based on identities such as race and social location (Dugan, 2017). Normalizing talent themes and positioning all talents as equally valuable, capable of being developed and employed, does not consider barriers that people with minoritized racial, ability, religious, gender, and sexual identities experience.

For example, Self-Assurance, a talent in the influencing domain, focuses on an individual's confidence and faith in their own abilities (Gallup, n.d.-a). This talent theme can be especially helpful in winning others over, building rapport, and connecting with an audience. However, individuals with minoritized racial identities may experience additional barriers in developing or employing a strong sense of Self-Assurance resulting from interpersonal and systemic oppression and violence. Self-Assurance is also received differently based on social location. For instance, White cisgender men employing Self-Assurance are likely to be received as confident and effective communicators. We encourage readers to consider the different ways that people of color, especially women and trans people of color may be criticized, rejected, or labeled as intimidating or overly confident by developing and employing Self-Assurance in similar ways. By relying on color evasiveness, StrengthsQuest utilizes talent themes and measures of talent in ways that normalize Whiteness and marginalize people of color.

Normalization

Liu and Baker (2016) illuminate the ways that normalizing Whiteness in explorations of leadership shape conceptions of "moral" and "ethical" lead-

ers and leadership. Conceptions of moral and ethical leadership privilege the values, ways of knowing, and lived experiences of White people. Normalized Whiteness is common practice across leadership education. When we only discuss White leaders, center White history, utilize research that centers White students, and assume that students do not have to contend with managing racism in the process of developing as leaders, we continue to normalize Whiteness (Dugan, 2017; Liu & Baker, 2016).

StrengthsQuest education normalizes Whiteness in a variety of ways. Consider our colleague, a Black woman with *Command* as her top talent theme (Dugan, Barnes & Turman, 2016). *Command* is characterized by a person's desire or natural ability to take charge, make an impact, and inspire others to do the same (Gallup, n.d.-a). She discussed how she managed her *Command* strength differently than her White and/or male peers. From her experience, when White people, especially White men, utilized *Command*, they were labeled as leaders or problem solvers. However, when she utilized *Command*, she was more likely to be labeled "bossy," "opinionated," or as a "control freak" (Dugan et al., 2016). Although the ability to take the lead, especially in group settings, is an important talent, presenting this talent without any consideration of identity assumes that all people can utilize or live out this identity without barriers; this assumption highlights the danger of normalizing Whiteness. Normalization reinforces the narrative that doing leadership requires one to "do whiteness" (Liu & Baker, 2016). Presenting talent themes, like *Command*, in an identity-neutral way, requires people to perform Whiteness in order to embody their strengths.

Solipsism

White people can choose to design and facilitate StrengthsQuest education without considering identity because solipsism allows White people to exist as if Whiteness is universal. Whenever tools, workshops, and curricula are designed without considering race,

Whiteness is normalized. The challenge in overcoming solipsism and the hegemony of White supremacy is that many White people cannot understand, or begin to consider, why or how people with marginalized racial identities cannot and do not engage in the world in the same ways as White people (Sullivan, 2006).

StrengthsQuest education facilitators uphold solipsistic practices and worldviews when they fail to make space for students to disagree with or challenge their top five talent themes. Assuming that the StrengthsFinder assessment and corresponding top five themes map perfectly on to all peoples' lives assumes that the tool fits all people equally. This belief in a one-size-fits-all approach is a function of both the normalization of Whiteness and solipsistic ways of thinking. Building off the example of our colleague with Command as her top talent theme, facilitators' inability to see incongruences and relationships between social identity, location, and enactment of talents highlight solipsistic worldviews. By assuming that all people have the same opportunities, or lack of barriers, to embodying and employing talent themes, people fail to consider the ways that hegemonic White supremacy shapes the lives and daily choices of people of color. Educators, including leadership educators, have a responsibility to check their own solipsistic ways of thinking; claiming ignorance about a tool's shortcomings is not an excuse. Leadership educators have an ethical responsibility to critically engage with and question the tools and practices they use; otherwise, students of color will continually be confronted with tools that do not support their identity, experiences, or ways of knowing.

Reconstructing StrengthsQuest Education

Because we have provided a deconstruction of StrengthsQuest, we also want to imagine a reconstruction of StrengthsQuest education. That is, we want to work toward altering and rebuilding StrengthsQuest in "ways that contribute to a more just world" (Dugan, 2017, p. 46). In our effort at reconstruction, we

consider StrengthsQuest as the tool itself, common facilitation practices, and its place in the larger leadership development context. We rely on two tools of reconstruction, disrupting normativity and attending to power (Dugan, 2017), in order to encourage facilitators, educators, and researchers to consider new ways to utilize StrengthsQuest as a tool for leadership development. However, we recognize the limitations of our social positions to this task. Therefore, we provide recommendations for the collective reconstruction of StrengthsQuest, which includes an invitation for additional critiques and contributions to be made.

In Dugan's (2018) editor's note for *New Directions for Student Leadership*, he asks leadership educators to critically consider their own roles in perpetuating color evasive leadership education practices:

As educators, what compels us to teach a story most often told about leadership rather than beginning with the base learning skills to approach any topic through a lens allowing for deconstruction and reconstruction? How might resistance reflect our own need to "unlearn" in ways that are both uncomfortable and require considerable effort? (p. 6)

Many leadership educators perpetuate the normalization of Whiteness as an institution by failing to critically examine their tools and pedagogy and are resistant to changing existing tools and practices. We argue it is through a lack of critical examination that many leadership educators continue to unquestioningly utilize StrengthsQuest as a tool for leadership education without critically considering the tool's shortcomings. Educators have used color evasive theories and approaches, like StrengthsQuest, in leadership development for too long. Reimagining and reconstructing StrengthsQuest and other leadership development tools might be difficult, messy, and uncomfortable. However, existing theories and practices are no longer sufficient; frankly, they never were. Further, the work of transforming campus leadership

development practices cannot be done immediately or in isolation. Rather, we echo Munin and Dugan's (2011) recommendations that this work should be done *in community* and sustained over time.

First, we must critically examine our current common practices around leadership development on campus. Which theories are we privileging? Whose research are we leaning on? How did our current programs originate? How are our current programs evolving? By asking these tough questions, we gain a deeper understanding of our context. Moreover, we will likely find notable issues that require an overhaul. This piece examined StrengthsQuest as a leadership development tool, utilizing many of these questions. For example, Dugan (2017) found that the reliability of the StrengthsQuest assessment instrument has incredible flaws that must be acknowledged. More specifically, the scale for the *Activator* talent theme "does not work with students of color yet continues to be used" (p. 102). How do we negotiate the continued use of a tool that we know has essential flaws that directly impact students of color?

Next, we consider Dean Spade's (2015) concept of trickle-up social justice: a concept that reimagines the design of social justice movements by prioritizing the needs of the *most* marginalized members of a community (i.e., trans people; people of color; immigrants; people experiencing poverty; people impacted by the criminal justice system) and using that as a starting point. What would it look like for a leadership development program to prioritize the needs, desires, and lived experiences of our most marginalized students? By applying Spade's (2015) concept of trickle-up social justice to leadership education, we can fundamentally change the ways we select tools and implement leadership education to place justice and inclusion at the front of our work. For leadership programs to continue to utilize StrengthsQuest education, educators must be prepared to name and unpack the tool's shortcomings and design workshops and educational interventions in ways that allow for critique, rejection, and complexity in the tool's application. Some educa-

tors may choose to no longer utilize StrengthsQuest as a tool for leadership development. Although the primary goal of StrengthsQuest—to help individuals identify and leverage their talents for success in multiple domains—is well-intended, current practices continue to privilege Whiteness.

Additionally, the continued interrogation of existing leadership tools and practices should engage students' voices. In this way, practitioners can create spaces for students to share their own narratives and counternarratives and engage in deconstructing and reconstructing tools like StrengthsQuest (Dugan, 2017). Too often, educators ignore identity and critical perspectives in leadership education because they are worried that students have yet to master foundational knowledge and will, therefore, be unprepared to engage in critical analysis. A common argument the authors heard when working to integrate critical perspectives into their own teaching around StrengthsQuest was that students would not be receptive to or able to understand the critiques and shortcomings of the StrengthsQuest tool because they were still trying to master the basics of the tool. Shielding students and excluding activities and discussions that promote critical thinking only serve to normalize Whiteness and perpetuate color evasiveness. Research shows that younger students are able to grasp and engage with critical perspectives more quickly than older students; older and more experienced students simply have more to unlearn (Dugan, 2018). If campuses are committed to using tools like StrengthsQuest with students, then it is essential to practice critical engagement that acknowledges the limitations and flaws of the tool. This serves both to undermine the normalization of Whiteness and to amplify the experiences of marginalized identities.

We also acknowledge the idea of critically interrogating widely used leadership tools, like StrengthsQuest, is easier said than done. Leadership education and educators must consider students' and colleagues' developmental readiness when introducing critical perspectives. This is not to say that anyone

should be shielded from critically examining tools and theories. Rather, facilitators should recognize that students and colleagues, including White people and people of color, might be at different levels of understanding their own social identities, systems of power, and structural oppression. White students may initially be defensive and resistant to practices and exercises that undermine and challenge Whiteness in StrengthsQuest education (DiAngelo, 2011). Foste (2017) identified three constructions of White racial identity: Ignorant, Emergent, and Critical. Students participating in Ignorant and Emergent constructions of Whiteness may struggle to understand the ways Whiteness has shaped their perspectives and experiences. Direct efforts to undermine White supremacy may trigger fragility and resistance (DiAngelo, 2011). The role of White facilitators who are committed to anti-racism may be an especially powerful tool for connecting with and challenging White students' development and thinking around Whiteness.

Finally, the ease with which people of color critically reimagine a relationship with StrengthsQuest may be complicated as well. As previously mentioned, the institution of Whiteness is pervasive and has immeasurable influence on members of a community, including people of color. Facilitators might find that students of color who approach leadership with color or evasiveness might challenge the notion of complicating the tool's privileging of Whiteness. Therefore, ensuring that all facilitators are prepared to guide students through exploring StrengthsQuest with a critical lens, share relevant examples, and create spaces for students to grapple with making sense and modifying existing tools is essential for the successful implementation of more equitable and just approaches to leadership and StrengthsQuest education.

Implications

Our interrogation of StrengthsQuest using a critical Whiteness framework has implications for both research and practice. There is a need for continued critical research on common leadership development

practices and tools. Although StrengthsQuest is a widely used tool on college campuses today, there are other tools that can be critically examined as well. Additionally, the tenets of CWS serve as a useful theoretical tool to investigate how common leadership practices engage in color evasiveness, normalization, and solipsism. Future inquiries could utilize other tenets of CWS. Alternatively, theoretical arguments could be made using the tenets of critical race theory (CRT) or other critical theories.

In addition to our offerings for a collective reconstruction of StrengthsQuest education on campus, it is important that leadership educators examine their own talent themes and positionality through ongoing critical reflexivity. Critical reflexivity is an "understanding of the diversity and complexity of one's own social location" (Hesse-Biber, 2017, p. 45). Critical reflexivity assists educators with acknowledging the ways their identities, values, and ideals influence their work. Engaging in critical reflexivity can take many forms, both formally and informally. Individually, a leadership educator can spend time reflecting on their own journey into leadership work, their conceptualization of leadership, their biases related to leadership training, and their preferences of tools and activities. The topics should expand and explore the ways in which social identities influence perceptions and beliefs about leadership. These reflection topics could turn into dialogue with colleagues. Collectively, professionals engaged in leadership work on campus should dedicate time together to engage in deep, critical discussions around current leadership practices and ways to transform them into more inclusive, justice-oriented practices.

Finally, we have provided a template for an activity to facilitate reflection on the connections between individual StrengthsQuest talent themes and Whiteness (Appendix). In Appendix 1, we share a chart that includes several of our talent themes, messages we have received about those talent themes, and a summary of the ways we make sense of those messages in relation to Whiteness. This activity is designed to help people

begin to make connections between social location and social identities with their StrengthsQuest talent themes. We encourage educators and StrengthsQuest facilitators to use and amend this tool to engage in reflection related to your own experiences with StrengthsQuest. This tool could be modified to explore connections between talent themes and other racial identities in addition to other social identities like gender, sexual orientation, or ability status.

In order to effectively disrupt Whiteness as an institution in leadership education, educators and facilitators in every office and on every campus must commit to examining their existing practices, to challenging their existing tools, and to holding themselves accountable to center identity and critical perspectives. Despite programs' calls for inclusive practices and social justice, the reality is that individual educators' fears and lack of knowledge will continue to serve as a formidable barrier to implementing significant, sustainable, and far-reaching change.

Conclusion

In Ahmed's (2017) *Living a Feminist Life*, she shares about the power of naming things: "Not naming a problem in the hope that it will go away often means the problem just remains unnamed. At the same time, giving a problem a name does not make the problem go away" (p. 34). She continues: "To name something as sexist," or in our case—racist—"is not only to modify a relation by modifying our understanding of that relation; it is also to insist that further modification is required" (p. 35). We would be remiss if we did not name StrengthsQuest as a tool that perpetuates Whiteness and White supremacy. There is a need to modify our relationship with this existing tool as well as search for and design new, more inclusive alternatives. Further, we must modify our relationship with the tool through methods of deconstruction and reconstruction.

This manuscript began as a process to examine and critique StrengthsQuest as a tool for leadership education. We have provided several ideas and strat-

egies for educators to deconstruct and reconstruct StrengthsQuest as a tool. Yet, we cannot help but wonder if StrengthsQuest is a tool worth supporting and employing. Ignoring the essential problems with StrengthsQuest, as is done with many leadership education tools and theories, only allows the problem to persist and continue to enact harm. It is our responsibility as critical leadership educators to engage in the discomfort that comes along with naming, uncovering, and transforming the tools in our toolbox that perpetuate Whiteness and White supremacy.

Appendix 1

StrengthsQuest Talent Theme	Messages	Connection to Whiteness
Achiever (Second Author)	Hard work equals success, hard work determines your merit, and merit determines your opportunities	Whiteness as discourse perpetuates the myth of meritocracy and colorblindness. Race and identity shouldn't matter, because success comes to those who work hard. Growing up white, I believed that merit and hard work alone should determine a person's success in life. Achiever as a talent theme prizes hard work and posits that achievement is the key to success.
Focus (Second Author)	Focus feeds achievement and merit – through Focus you will be able to meet your goals. People who are too focused are perceived as “cold,” “unemotional,” or overly ambitious.	Focus, combined with Achiever and Discipline, can easily contribute to a colorblind focus on merit and achievement as measures of success. Focus posits work ethic as a tool to success without considering other barriers. Furthermore, an obsession with tasks and work marks relationships and community as less valuable, discounting various ways of knowing and doing work.
Self-Assurance (First Author)	Confident in ability to manage one's own life; inner compass that gives them confidence that decisions are right	Innate sense of confidence that may or may not come from actual qualifications, knowledge, or merit. Self-assurance is easier to develop when you don't experience multiple barriers in developing confidence (i.e. teachers not expecting you to do as well as other kids in school, students not assuming you were admitted to your program because of affirmative action, etc.)
Input (First Author)	Having a craving to know more; to collect and archive lots of information	Comfort in finding knowledge that represents experiences of people like me (i.e. white men), desire to continue to collect more information as it validates my ways of knowing and learning. My craving for knowledge has consistently been seen, affirmed, and cultivated in my education experiences rather than ignored, dismissed, or pushed aside.

References

- Ahmed, S. (2017). *Living a feminist life*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Annamma, S. A., Jackson, D. D., & Morrison, D. (2017). Conceptualizing color-evasiveness: Using dis/ability critical race theory to expand a color-blind racial ideology in education and society. *Race Ethnicity and Education, 20*(2), 147–162. doi:10.1080/13613324.2016.1248837
- Astin, A. W. (1993). *What matters in college: Four critical years revisited*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Cabrera, N. L. (2017). White immunity: Working through some of the pedagogical pitfalls of “privilege”. *Journal Committed to Social Change on Race and Ethnicity, 3*(1), 78–90.
- Cabrera, N. L., Franklin, J. D., & Watson, J. S. (2016). Whiteness in higher education: The invisible missing link in diversity and racial analyses. *ASHE Higher Education Report, 42*(6), 7–125. doi:10.1002/aehe.20116
- Carpenter, S., & Haber-Curran, P. (2013). The role of research and scholarship in the professionalization of student affairs. *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa, 1*(1), 1–9.
- Clifton, D. O., Anderson, E., & Schreiner, L. A. (2006). *StrengthsQuest: Discover and develop your strengths in academics, career and beyond* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Gallup Press.
- DiAngelo, R. (2011). White fragility. *The International Journal of Critical Pedagogy, 3*(3), 54–70.
- Dugan, J. P. (2011). Research on college student leadership. In S. R. Komives, J. P. Dugan, J. E. Owen, W. Wagner, C. Slack, & Associates (Eds.), *Handbook for student leadership development* (2nd ed., pp. 59–84). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Dugan, J. P. (2017). *Leadership theory: Cultivating critical perspectives*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.
- Dugan, J. P. (2018). Editor’s note. *New Directions for Student Leadership, 2018*(159), 5–8.
- Dugan, J. P., Barnes, A., & Turman, N. (2016). *Integrating critical perspectives into leadership development: Moving content and pedagogy from diversity through inclusion towards justice*. Pre-institute workshop. Leadership Educators Institute, Long Beach, CA.
- Early, S., & Fincher, J. (2017). Consciousness of self. In S. R. Komives & W. Wagner (Eds.), *Leadership for a better world* (2nd ed., pp. 43–65). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Foste, Z. (2017). *Narrative constructions of Whiteness among White undergraduates* (Doctoral dissertation, Ohio State University). Retrieved from ProQuest. (Order No. 10665949).
- Gallup. (n.d.-a). *All 34 CliftonStrengths themes descriptions*. Retrieved from <https://www.strengthsquest.com/193541/themes-full-description.aspx>
- Gallup. (n.d.-b). *Clifton strengths for students*. Retrieved from <http://www.strengthsquest.com/content/141728/index.aspx>
- Gallup. (n.d.-c). *Four domains of team strengths*. Retrieved from <https://www.strengthsquest.com/227012/four-domains-team-strength-pdf.aspx>
- Haber-Curran, P., & Owen, J. E. (2013). Engaging the whole student: Student affairs and the national leadership education research agenda. *Journal of Leadership Education, 12*(2), 38–50. doi:10.12806/V12/I3/TF2
- Hesse-Biber, S. N. (2017). *The practice of qualitative research* (3rd ed.). Los Angeles, CA: Sage.
- Kezar, A. (2002). Reconstructing exclusive and static images of leadership: An application of positionality theory. *The Journal of Leadership Studies, 3*(3), 94–109. doi:10.1177/107179190200800308
- Kezar, A., Carducci, R., & Contreras-McGavin, M. (2006). *Rethinking the “L” word in higher education: The revolution of research on leadership*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Kimball, E. W., & Ryder, A. J. (2014). Using history to promote reflection: A model for reframing student affairs practice. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice, 51*(3), 298–310. doi:10.1515/jsarp-2014-0030
- Komives, S. R. (2011). Advancing leadership education. In S. R. Komives, J. P. Dugan, J. E. Owen, W. Wagner, C. Slack, & Associates (Eds.), *Handbook for student leadership development* (2nd ed., pp. 1–19). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Liu, H., & Baker, C. (2016). White knights: Leadership as the heroicisation of Whiteness. *Leadership, 12*(4), 420–448. doi:10.1177/1742715014565127
- Louis, M. C. (2012). *The Clifton StrengthsFinder and student strengths development*. Omaha, NE: The Gallup Organization.
- McDonald, M., & O’Callaghan, J. (2008). Positive psychology: A Foucauldian critique. *The Humanistic Psychologist, 36*(2), 127–142.
- Miller, A. (2008). A critique of positive psychology—or the “the new science of happiness.” *Journal of Philosophy of Education, 42*(3-4), 591–608. doi:10.1111/j.1467-9752.2008.00646.x
- Munin, A., & Dugan, J. P. (2011). Inclusive design. In S. R. Komives, J. P. Dugan, J. E. Owen, W. Wagner, C. Slack, & Associates (Eds.), *Handbook for student leadership development* (2nd ed., pp. 157–176). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Ospina, S., & Foldy, E. (2009). A critical review of race and ethnicity in the leadership literature: Surfacing context,

- power and the collective dimensions of leadership. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 20(6), 876–896. doi:10.1016/j.leaqua.2009.09.005
- Rath, T., & Conchie, B. (2008). *Strengths-based leadership: Great leaders, teams, and why people follow them*. New York, NY: Gallup Press.
- Seligman, M. E. P., & Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2000). Positive psychology: An introduction. *American Psychologist*, 55(1), 5–14. doi:10.1037/0003-066X.55.1.5
- Soria, K. M., Roberts, J. E., & Reinhard, A. P. (2015). First-year college students' strengths awareness and perceived leadership development. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, 52(1), 89-103. doi:10.1080/19496591.2015.996057
- Spade, D. (2015). *Normal life: Administrative violence, critical trans politics, and the limits of law*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Stewart, D. L. (2010). Researcher as instrument: Understanding “shifting” findings in constructivist research, *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, 47(3), 291–306. doi:10.2202/1949-6605.6130
- Sullivan, S. (2006). *Revealing Whiteness: The unconscious habits of racial privilege*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Sundararajan, L. (2005). Happiness donut: A Confucian critique of positive psychology. *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology*, 25(1), 35–60.

Recommended Citation:

Tapia-Fuselier, N. & Irwin, L. (2019). Strengths so White: Interrogating StrengthsQuest education through a critical Whiteness lens. *Journal of Critical Scholarship on Higher Education and Student Affairs*, 5(1), 30-44.