What Do We (White Counsellors) Do About Whiteness?

by

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Abstract

While there is considerable encouragement for counsellors to uphold social justice values in the course of therapy, there is little in the way of guidance when it comes to how white counsellors might address racial bias, thoughts, and behaviours with their white clients. This project reviews the state of research on whiteness from a psychological perspective, including in relation to counselling and counsellor education. There continues to be limited and reticent uptake on these issues both in the classroom and in the therapy room, despite plentiful evidence that prejudice not only hurts those being oppressed but also harms those active or implicit in oppression. There have been significant offerings from Black, Indigenous, and Person of Colour (BIPOC) scholars that provide grounding in how this work can go forward in order to address ongoing racial violence and injustice. The potential for making inroads in the therapeutic relationship to support white people to come to terms with their racial identity is compelling and illuminating models from several BIPOC experts are shared and co-mingled as a potential path for white counsellors to follow forward.

Keywords: whiteness, racism, white privilege, white identity, anti-racism interventions

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Chapter One: Introduction

This chapter introduces the research project by outlining the major aspects of the project, including the research question, context and framework, data collection and analysis methods, key terms, and positionality statement. In each section, there are depictions of how these aspects will inform the project and their purpose in the research design. This chapter lays the groundwork for the literature review (Chapter Two) and applied practices (Chapter Three) that are the substance of the research project.

Research Question

The main research question for this study is: can counselling be a space for white counsellors to support white clients in addressing their white privilege and/or conscious/unconscious racist thoughts and beliefs? The underpinning of this question include: 1) is this a *role* that counsellors are able to or should take up; 2) is counselling an *appropriate setting* in which to engage with clients on this topic; and 3) are there specific *competencies or practices* that counsellors need to learn to be effective in addressing racism with their clients? These questions will be explored in the following sections, as well as the literature review and application section of the project.

Significance and Context of Research Question

This project reviews relevant research on the role that psychotherapy can play in addressing white supremacy and racial bias at its source—in the minds and bodies of white people. There is an observed need for more synthesis and guidance on the research examining and evaluating the evolving responsibilities for counsellors regarding advocacy and activation for racial justice. The purpose of this project is to consolidate some of this research to make white counsellors more aware and attuned to the role that they can play, the potential imperative

for them to do so, and an offering of some practical frameworks and recommendations to take into their practice.

While there has been ample (though certainly not sufficient or completed) research and training aimed at cultural competency to support white counsellors working with Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC) clients, there has been much less inquiry or guidance on how counsellors should or even might address racial bias or social justice issues with white clients (Miller et al., 2018). While accessibility and relative safety of BIPOC people in the white-dominated field of counselling is hugely important, the most significant part of dealing with the problem of racism and racial oppression is disrupting the thoughts and behaviours of those unconsciously or consciously upholding white supremacy (Wilcox et al., 2024). Healing from racial trauma requires not just that BIPOC clients are supported in systemically understanding the sources of their symptoms, but that white people are addressing it in themselves and the systems they benefit from as the source of the problem. The therapy room has the potential to provide a space for white clients to unpack their shame and guilt associated with white privilege, as well as to reflect on the ways in which racism has shown up in their thoughts and actions in order to notice and interrupt those beliefs and behaviours going forward.

The British Columbia Association of Clinical Counsellors (BCACC) Principle II: Respect for the Dignity of All Peoples, B.5 states, “Registered Clinical Counsellors ensure that people, whether represented in the course of care or not, are free from prejudice, bias, or racializing harm” (BCACC, 2023, p. 9). This standard indicates that counsellors have a responsibility to address racial bias and harmful beliefs. The implied expectation is largely more aspirational than practical as combatting prejudice, bias, and racial harm—whether internally or externally—is a lifelong pursuit; to be free from such thoughts in our current social context is not only unlikely

but nearly unimaginable. However, this principle identifies that addressing prejudice and bias is absolutely a role that counsellors must attend to, and therefore the counselling setting is an important space to engage in anti-racist work.

BCACC's Principle V: Responsibility to Society (F.1) also outlines that "Registered Clinical Counsellors demonstrate social responsibility by engaging in action that promotes … the rights and needs of diverse individuals, relationships, families, and groups, including those who are vulnerable, underrepresented, racialized, and/or marginalized" (2023, p. 13). While this call can be seen as encouragement to participate in activism beyond the therapy room, such activism also inheres in everyday practice; taking this principle to heart would include addressing racist thoughts that a white client might express in session, which will always be at the expense of those who are vulnerable, underrepresented, racialized, and/or marginalized.

Conceptual Framework of Study

For this project, I am investigating the concept of white people addressing occurrences of racist thoughts or behaviors in clinical therapy settings. This is conducted through a comprehensive literature review with findings analyzed and synthesized to offer functional frameworks for white counsellors to consider in their own personal development and working with clients. The conceptual framework of this project is based in social justice and critical race theory, and the research approach is based in a transformative worldview.

The transformative worldview is grounded in a philosophical lens that is oriented toward justice with specific attention to the distribution and structures of power (Creswell, 2018). While the focus of this project is to examine how white people navigate issues of privilege, bias, and supremacy in a white-dominant society, the research is meant to hold up the expertise and

insights of non-dominant scholars and practitioners who inform how psychotherapy needs to be transformed in order to contribute to racial justice and wellbeing.

Critical race theory speaks to the social construction (rather than genetic basis) for race, used to deny rights and power to certain groups—Indigenous, Black, and other people deemed to not be included in whiteness, which has shifted significantly throughout history (Baima & Sude, 2020). Critical race theory also articulates the importance of acknowledging the significant role that race plays in our society, drastically impacting the wellbeing of BIPOC populations while deferring power and privilege to white people that is unearned and even unrecognized in the context of privilege. This is the condition where a white counsellor who claims to be "colour-blind" is particularly harmful, as it is precisely this reticence to admit that they are benefitting from whiteness that underwrites the historical and ongoing trauma and violence BIPOC communities experience.

Decolonizing Approach

In order to express what a decolonizing approach means for me in the context of this project, I am moving to a more personal expression of my learning and understanding in relationship with this approach. The following section is written from a more personal lens to properly capture the importance of de-centering Western methods of knowing and valuing expertise in order to uphold those who are experts and knowledge holders on these topics. As a white settler attempting to work on my own racial bias and internalized white supremist thoughts and beliefs, it is essential to be clear about how I have approached this project.

I intend this project to be decolonizing in its approach by centring the expertise of BIPOC writers who are informed by their own experience, their communities, their scholarship, and that of generations of ancestors subjugated by colonialism and racism, with worldviews and wellness

practices that have been kept alive in spite of ongoing attempts to either destroy and invalidate or appropriate them. I am aware that coming from a place of power in the colonial hierarchy, my attempts at sharing this knowledge will at times misrepresent or even appropriate teachings that were not meant for me. In this way, I accept that I will make mistakes, will attempt to appreciate those who criticize and correct me when I do so, and work to learn and pass along what I am made aware of in the process. Decolonizing is a lifelong journey, something I will never perfect, and approaching this work with humility and appreciation for all feedback is one way I hope to contribute by sharing what has been generously offered without undermining the main messaging. With this in mind, some of the following sections of the project will use significant quotations from the original authors to allow their truth to be apparent as I attempt to collaboratively weave ideas together for white practitioners to apply to their own learning.

I have had the incredible privilege of learning from and alongside Indigenous colleagues, teachers, and friends, ways of decolonizing research through my evaluation work led by an Indigenous consulting firm and now with an Indigenous team in the health field. The unlearning that I have done has called for a deep listening and synthesizing of what I hear through relationship, through embodiment, through feeling what is shared, through knowing that I will never fully understand others' experience based on my own positionality, but allowing others' wisdom, stories, and truths to change me nonetheless. I am hoping that readers and observers of this project will also be able to sink into a deeper experience of listening, feeling, and embodying wise practices and insights offered from BIPOC scholars who are making such an effort to extrapolate their knowledge into frameworks and lessons that others, including white people, are encouraged to engage with and integrate.

"Objectivity" and Embodiment

The nature of academic research intentionally stifles and undermines voices and cultural expertise through the dominant white/Western paradigm or worldview that holds only academic writing or "objective," "unbiased" ideas and research as legitimate or valid. This project takes into consideration how embodied connection to emotions helps move from the cognitive to the experiential in a way that is necessary for exploring deeply unsettling areas of prejudice and privilege. Tafoya (1995) describes how the Western paradigm requires amputating a person's gender, sexuality, language, and spirituality, undermining the complexity and totality of a person in the context of the connections and relationships that make up their lived experience and expertise. Hampton (1995) further outlines the perils that stem from cutting off the brain from the body in the wider social order:

> Feeling is connected to our intellect and we ignore it, hide from, disguise, and suppress that feeling at our peril, and at the peril of those around us…When we try to cut ourselves off at the neck and pretend an objectivity that does not exist in the human world, we become dangerous, to ourselves first, and then to the people around us. (p. 52)

By bringing embodiment into this subject matter, there is an acknowledgement of how aggressively the dominant Western worldview seeks to take control of the narrative. (And at this point, I want to note how often we use the term *Western* when what we actually mean is *white*.) It has taken psychology as a whole a long time to return to the body as the site of healing, which was denied and undermined and remains an outlier due to the privileging of "evidence-based" requirements. Such modalities that are better captured through qualitative means are seen as less valuable based on the complexity or insufficiency of trying to measure these impacts in a field and paradigm that only holds quantitative data as legitimate.

Indigenous scholars have been long been rooted in ways of knowing that are generated and validated through the body, through lived experience, through relationship with others and the world around us—ways of knowing that Western paradigms are only recently coming to appreciate. As Maori scholar Tuhiwai Smith (2012) highlights, the academy has never validated the knowledge of Indigenous people, generated through age-old practices, intuited theories, and methodologies developed over eons; Indigenous wisdom and insight is placed outside the scope of what Western intellectuals viewed as valid. Simpson (2017) describes Nishnaabeg intelligence, in contrast to Western scholarship, as:

> The comingling of emotional and intellectual knowledge combined in motion or movement, and the making and remaking of the world in a generative fashion within Indigenous bodies that are engaged in accountable relationships with other beings. This is propelled by the diversity of Indigenous bodies of all ages, genders, races, and abilities in attached correlations with all aspects of creation. This is the exact opposite of white supremacist, masculine, hetero-patriarchal theory and research process in the academy. (p. 21)

As a white researcher, I do not intend to claim competency for Indigenous or other ways of knowing, but instead turn to others to speak from their expertise to highlight areas that have been missed and intentionally undermined when attempting to confront whiteness and white privilege, especially in the field of psychology. BIPOC scholars generously offer possible paths by which white people might move beyond intellectualizing, into embodied wisdom, and toward a better place, together. The literature review and applied practice sections to follow will outline this journey further, but it is important in this chapter to appreciate the worldviews and lenses that make this work possible.

Relational Accountability: Honouring Knowledge Keepers

Wilson (2008) highlights the importance in cross-cultural research of appreciating our inability to perceive what we are not primed to see or ask about: “Research is all about unanswered questions, but it also reveals our unquestioned answers” (p. 6). Further, he notes, beyond “seeing is believing”, it is nearly impossible for us to perceive something that we don’t believe exists or occurs in the first place. These are some important starting points when entering in to study something as elusive and intentionally unexamined as whiteness.

In order to have relational accountability and be in respectful relationship with the ideas I will be promoting in this project, it is important to share about the people generating them and their place in social movement and therapeutic work (Wilson, 2008). As a white student and researcher, it is intentional that on the topic of how we need to address whiteness, white privilege, and racism in the therapy room, I am taking guidance from experts on navigating whiteness and the violence it causes, particularly BIPOC authors and knowledge keepers. While my personal education in racial identity and harm has been supported by numerous authors, storytellers, community members, friends, and colleagues, for this project I am focusing on three experts who speak directly to the topic of whiteness and racism within their practices as therapists and instructors on racial identities and injustice.

The final chapter of this project attempts to braid together contributions from three thought leaders and experts on how to address racism and social justice in the current era. As an introduction, the important foundations that they are providing will be reviewed further below.

Helms and White Identity

Janet E. Helms wrote the first edition of her book, *A Race is a Nice Thing to Have: A Guide to Being a White Person or Understanding the White Persons in Your Life*, in 1992. My

2020 third edition is slim, a mere 85 pages, yet the wisdom and guidance offered within is immense. While there have been numerous generous offerings from BIPOC scholars in recent years on what white people can do about racism, this is one of the pre-eminent offerings to white people who seek to overcome their own racism from a Black scholar so invested in the field of psychology. Helms is the Augustus Long Professor Emeritus at Boston College and a Fellow of the American Psychological Association. Her articles and contributions are extensive, as are her awards and accolades, and yet her work was showcased only a handful of times in my search for expertise on how white counsellors can address white privilege in the therapeutic setting. Her offering, revised for our current environment, is as compelling and useful today as it would have been three decades ago.

Thom and Transformation Potential

Kai Cheng Thom is an author, poet, mental health community worker, and somatic coach. She is a transwoman of East Asian descent and has provided insightful perspectives on conflict resolution and orienting to love in movements with the people who thought they were working towards liberation causing harm. Thom offers an updated perspective on the Window of Tolerance that provides important guard rails for white people attempting to be part of transformative work in undoing the harm of whiteness (Siegel, 1999).

Hemphill and Somatic Understanding

Prentis Hemphill similarly provides a clear and generous invitation, in their case into embodiment as a means to heal individually and collectively. In their book *What It Takes to Heal: How Transforming Ourselves Can Change the World,* Hemphill offers somatic understanding and practices as a foundation for addressing racial injustice and moving towards societal change. They are a therapist, political organizer, and embodiment facilitator who

founded both the Embodiment Institute and the Black Embodiment Initiative. Their wisdom and offering will be entwined with Helms' and Thom's frameworks in the final application section.

Data Collection Procedure

Data collection for this qualitative project involves a wide-ranging search of academic and popular press books, peer-reviewed articles, and additional resources to inform a robust understanding of the current state of interrogating whiteness in the realm of psychotherapy. The literature review also highlights gaps in the current body of research and reviews critiques and shortcomings of existing data sources. Research findings have been summarized in the next chapter and build toward an integration of frameworks that will be presented in the final chapter.

Analysis Method

This study uses a descriptive approach to aggregate current research on how white counsellors can approach racism and white supremacy in the therapy room. Themes were identified related to competencies and practices that have a role to play in addressing racial discrimination for practitioner and client. These competencies and practices have been considered alongside seminal offerings from BIPOC experts to weave together a suggested framework for white counsellors to integrate into their therapeutic practice and personal anti-racist work.

Definitions of Terms

In this study, white and whiteness will be intentionally not capitalized, except at the beginning of a sentence, to address the superiority these terms have undeservingly held in all academic and social systems as a result of colonization. While this does not conform to the American Psychological Association guidelines for academic writing, I make this choice to disrupt the power differentials that exist between white and BIPOC experience and scholarship.

Intersectionality

The concept focused on examining the dimension of oppression that operate not on a single axis but compound and interlock depending on dynamics of difference and sameness regarding gender, race, and other social location or identities proximate to power or repression (Crenshaw et al., 2013).

Racism

System of power, privilege, dominance, and oppression in relation to socially constructed hierarchies of race, resulting in violence, harm, and disparities for those intentionally made vulnerable on the basis of ethnicity as prescribed by those at the top of the hierarchy identified as white (Miller et. al., 2018).

Social Justice

The systemic social transformation to rectify inequality, oppression, and violence that have been historically entrenched by a group with power over others (Grzanka et al., 2019).

Whiteness

An experience both individual—determined by perceived skin colour and how society reacts to this—and social/cultural, with implications that are upheld through class structures, as well as systemic policies and practices upheld by the principles of white supremacy, neoliberalism, and capitalism (Malamed, 2021). The parameters of who "counts" as white has changed historically with socio-political shifts (e.g., Italian and Jewish people, once excluded from whiteness, are now commonly considered white).

White Privilege

Social/political/economic advantage that is unearned and bestowed simply for perceived affiliation with whiteness, regardless of whether the recipient realizes these advantages are unearned or recognizes the negative impacts from which whiteness keeps them (Hoffman, 2023).

White Supremacy

The collection of beliefs, norms, and values that both explicitly and implicitly place whiteness as the standard for excellence and not only undermines but makes dangerous all other racial and cultural beliefs, norms, and values (Okun, 1999). The result of white supremacist beliefs and values permeating our social, legal, and political structures results in racial violence, trauma, and oppression for those who are not perceived as white.

Personal Positionality and Reflexivity

I am a cisgender, heterosexual, white settler with French, British, and Irish roots who grew up on the traditional, unceded territories of the Secwépemc and Ktunaxa Nations. I spent the last 15 years living and learning on the stolen lands of the Skwxwú7mesh Úxwumixw, xʷməθkʷəy̓əm, and səlilwətaɬ Nations. As of March 2025, I moved to Vancouver Island where this study was conceptualized and written on the lands of the Lək̓ʷəŋən (Songhees and Xʷsepsəm/Esquimalt) and W̱SÁNEĆ Peoples.

I grew up in an affluent nuclear family where housing, food, and physical security was not at risk. I have significant experience with the post-secondary academic system (two undergraduate degrees and a previous Master's degree), necessitating considerable unlearning in my journey to appreciate my unearned privilege, my participation in upholding colonialism and whiteness, and my responsibilities to disrupting white supremacy in myself and others.

I have had the enormous privilege of learning from BIPOC colleagues, friends, and communities whose willingness to share and offer teachings in spite of the colonial violence and harm they and their ancestors have experienced as a direct result of my ancestors and even myself is humbling. I am called to this topic and this work by humility and gratitude, in the spirit of reciprocity, and most importantly, for justice and love.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

The following chapter provides an overview of the current state of research and understanding on whiteness generally, as well as the history of whiteness in psychology, white privilege, white supremacy, and white culture. Following is a further investigation into how racism itself causes harm to the white people perpetuating it, albeit in a much more limited way than to those being oppressed. The final section is an exploration of the recommendation on addressing racism in the counselling room for white dyads and some of the skills and competencies white counsellors might acquire for this work.

Whiteness

As a realm of study, whiteness and how it might be addressed in counselling has largely been left untouched by scholars and practitioners alike. Despite the fact that association codes of conduct and counselling clinic values often speak to equity, inclusion, and respect for cultural diversity, very few resources identify just how a white counsellor might address racial bias and white privilege in practice when talking with people of their own race (Miller et al., 2018; Stovall, 2019). Before it is possible to start addressing and processing racism and whiteness in the counselling room, it is necessary to be able to define and practice how to talk about it at all. While counsellors are trained in a plethora of topics and issues that are extremely difficult to raise, few topics are more difficult for white people to discuss in the first place than whiteness (Anen, 2022b; Drustrup, 2021; Stovall, 2019).

When looking at the most relevant guiding literature on whiteness and how to address it, for the most part, the hardship of pointing to race and the role it plays not only in the wider system but also in psychology has been taken on by BIPOC scholars and experts; it has only more recently been shouldered in some ways by white academics (Suchet, 2014). Though a

substantial stack of academic articles come from journals addressing white privilege as a special issue theme, far fewer occur outside these special issues, indicating this conversation is still sidelined from mainstream discourse in psychology. In fact, it seems that few contributions have brought much more clarity to the topic than Helms has offered consistently over the last three decades, though some white scholars are finally starting to enter the discussion (Evans Holmes, 2022). And while many of the articles referenced Helms' work, authors overwhelmingly agreed that putting her guidance into practice is still far from the norm in the counselling field.

History of Whiteness in Psychology

To end racism, white people need to be responsible for its undoing (Helms, 2020). It is a straightforward proposition, but not one easily adopted. In part, racism is so intractable because rarely in human history do those in power willingly hand over that power. As many BIPOC leaders and scholars have brought to light, whiteness itself remains intentionally invisible and largely unnoticed by most white people. In psychology and counselling programs, cultural competence rarely includes mention of—never mind a focus on—whiteness. As one clinical psychologist reflected on her educational experience, "I never thought of my whiteness as a source of psychological vulnerability" (Stovall, 2019, p. 12).

For most of its history, psychological research investigated those not identified as white as the "other," highlighting how normative whiteness is in the field without ever being named (Morawski, 2004). Contemporary efforts to embrace multiculturalism; diversity, equity, and inclusion; or anti-oppression most often focus on the difference of non-white people from a status quo: the white, normative position (Bartoli et al., 2015). While the centering of non-dominant populations and groups is wanted and warranted, the continued refusal to examine and

interrogate whiteness itself is at the core of the unearned privilege that creates social hierarchies that in turn cause racist violence and harm (Dottolo & Kaschak, 2015).

The long and convoluted trajectory of who counts as white has been ever shifting, marked by constant maneuvering to uphold power and privilege (e.g., Painter, 2011; Wilkerson, 2020). Dottolo and Kaschak (2015) note that like other social identities, there is no monolithic whiteness, but a constantly shifting and at times contradictory identity that overlays class, gender, sexual orientation, regional, and cultural identity. As Painter points out in her seminal book *The History of White People,* "race is an idea, not a fact, and its question demands answers from the conceptual rather than the factual realm" (2011, p. viiii). Helms (2020) points out that even though race is an ever-shifting and nebulous concept, it is still essential to address directly in the psychology realm given the very real impacts of unearned social credit it grants to people identified as white versus the dire consequences for those perceived as not white.

Despite the slow progress on addressing whiteness in psychology, there has thankfully been a recent shift away from the false ideal of not seeing colour or being "colour-blind" when it comes to race. Colour-blindness is essentially an admission that racism exists, in that if race was not measured in a hierarchy, then acknowledging someone's skin colour would not cause white people the discomfort, embarrassment, and defensiveness that it does. As Helms identifies, "The things that people ignore or pretend do not exist are usually scary, unpleasant, or distasteful. Our skin colours do not belong in that category" (2020, p. 10). In fact, people who receive education that encourages colour-blind ideology are more likely to enact racial bias, whether implicitly or explicitly (Adams, 2015). Denying the role that race plays in society is not only misguided but upholds discrimination and prejudice.

White Privilege

White privilege is the foundation of racism, where someone benefits from their racial identity if they are assigned as white by society, regardless of class, nationality, gender, or any other identity they might hold (Helms, 2020). As we have learned from Crenshaw (2013) through intersectionality, there are multiple dimensions of oppression that compound depending on social location or identities and their connection to power or repression, but whiteness in and of itself – regardless of other social aspects –undeniably comes with significant privilege. Coates (2024) describes how he wishes his father had understood the impacts of white privilege, in that white people receive a level of credit that accrues exceedingly more wealth and resources while also being shielded from many mistakes or misfortune, rather than internalizing his circumstances as a Black man as personal failing.

Privilege allows white people to act unaware of the suffering caused by a racial hierarchy. Privilege is upheld and adhered to but not acknowledged in order to claim innocence or worthiness in a system that is anything but fair (Anen, 2022b). In this way, white privilege additionally protects many white people from even realizing that the system exists, which can fuel the escalation of defense, including rage and hate, when this privilege is laid bare.

White Supremacy

It is essential to understand that white supremacy encompasses more than just active support of racism. Grzanka et al. (2019) share a conveyor belt analogy to exemplify the enactment of white supremacy in a full range of beliefs and behaviours. Those who actively hold supremacist values are accelerated down the conveyor belt as they walk decisively forward; those less consciously (or unintentionally) racist walk more slowly, and some are not walking at all. However, due to the ubiquitous nature of white supremacy in our society—like a structural

conveyer belt on which we all stand—all of these people are contributing to and upholding oppressive power. It is only those white people who are actively walking in the opposite direction that are working against racism, and even they might falter and be swept some distance along with the others.

Menakem (2017) highlights how the term *white supremacy* often evokes extremists such as neo-Nazis and other white nationalist groups, while in actuality it is everywhere in Western society: part of the operating system and organizing structure underlying everything. Instead of *white supremacy*, Menakem refers to *white-body supremacy*, focusing on the embodiment of these systemic characteristics and associated traumas. As a Black American counsellor, scholar, and instructor, he speaks to the historical trauma that white colonialists brought to America from conflict in Europe during the Middle Ages, carried with them to the "New World" and built into the racialized hierarchy of American society. His hope is that "America will grow up and out of white-body supremacy; Americans will begin healing their long-held trauma around race; and whiteness will begin to evolve from a race to culture, and then to community" (Menakem, 2017, p. xviii).

White Culture

Defining white culture without centering power and privilege is inherently challenging and perhaps not yet even possible. Helms (2020) has outlined aspects of white culture—the norms, values, and practices associated with whiteness—including individualism, rationalism, action orientation, competition, as well as specific views on time, history, and the nuclear family. Helms suggests that not all aspects of white culture are necessarily problematic, but that white people ought to be able to accept that they are part of a distinct culture without using those distinctions to uphold racism.

Finding a way to embrace white culture feels like a tall order in the current context, which will certainly involve some modifications. Okun (2021) worked collectively with other equity leaders to highlight some of these same or related characteristics as indicative of white supremacy and to identify antidotes to counter harmful effects that might result. For example, where individualism can foster isolation, perfectionism, and aggressive competition, the antidotes offered include creating collective accountability and honouring process as much as outcomes. It is through some intentional reworking of the characteristics associated with whiteness that white racial identity has the potential to be reformed in a way that is somewhat disconnected from power and privilege.

Unfortunately, under the constraining terms racial hierarchy, oppression becomes the de facto culture of white people – just as racial trauma becomes conflated with the culture of non-white communities (Wilcox, 2023). The importance of racial identity work to create self and group conceptualizations beyond the determinants of white supremacy is a crucial part of the healing journey to move away from allowing oppression to define white as well as non-white cultures. As long as whiteness remains largely unspoken while simultaneously occupying the superordinate position in the supremist racial hierarchy, it will resist the development of healthy racial identity without exceptional and concerted effort (Adams, 2015).

Whiteness as Pathology

A request was made to the American Psychiatric Association in the 1960s to include an entry in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) for “extreme bigotry” in the face of fanatical violent outpourings in response to civil rights appeals (Stovall, 2019). The American Psychiatric Association determined that racial prejudice and the violence it incited was not an individual disorder but part of the American social phenomenon and therefore not

diagnosable. The current DSM (5th ed.; APA, 2022) makes substantial (compared to previous versions) references to racism in the context of cultural considerations and impacts on diagnoses. This includes an underscoring of the ubiquitous and systemic nature of racism that allows people to participate in prejudiced actions and structures without consciously endorsing racist ideology. However, racism and prejudice do not factor into any diagnosis concerning the individual, and neither whiteness nor white supremacy are specifically named.

In other attempts to make sense of racism through pathology, white privilege has on several occasions been explored as an expression of narcissism (Anen, 2022a; Levine, 2022; Miller & Josephs, 2009). Others have viewed it as addiction or as a type of psychosis related to delusion disorder (Golden, 2011; Stovall, 2019). Interestingly, the findings related to delusion disorder indicate that an awareness of delusions (facilitated by therapy) resulted in reduced paranoia and also decreased the level of prejudice with which they viewed the world.

Several major papers have been written on whiteness as narcissism, which makes sense in the context of those who might feel narcissistic or even sadistic delight in the superiority that their white identity brings them (Miller & Josephs, 2009). Whiteness has been described as a "narcissistic homeostasis" (Anen, 2022a, p. 622) which enables the individual to enjoy their inequitably elevated status as wholeness, masking their underlying incompleteness which relies on oppression.

Echoing the 1960s attempts to pathologize "extreme bigotry," Golden (2011) describes white privilege itself as a pathology and outlines the distortions that characterize internalized racial superiority, such as the compulsion to argue with People of Colour regarding their experience based on an inflated sense of perspective and rightness. Treating white privilege as an addiction, Golden outlines a twelve-step process for recovery that begins with acknowledging

powerlessness against being indoctrinated into a social order built on race and ends with a commitment to work with other white people to spread conscious anti-racist awareness.

Racism as Harmful to White People

Prominent Black leaders, including Toni Morrison and James Baldwin, have identified racism as a white response to the existential dread of American "freedom" (Stovall, 2019). Baldwin spoke of the tied liberations of white and Black people, in that white people need to set themselves free from the confines of racist thinking that keeps one from knowing oneself. As he stated in *Notes of a Native Son,* "I imagine one of the reasons people cling to their hates so stubbornly is because they sense once hate is gone, that they will be forced to deal with pain" (1955, p. 101). These sentiments are not shared to excuse or undermine the deadly impacts of racism on BIPOC individuals and communities, but to highlight that in addition to this violence, there are consequences for those who are helping to keep it in place (Drustrup, 2021).

Ta-Nehisi Coates (2024) relays his experience of living under racism as a Black man as a crushing physical weight that unloads more violence, more want, and more suffering onto Black people and operates like these burdens are deserved. Looking to those whose whiteness offers the exact opposite reality, he observes that what white people are experiencing one way or another is causing major breaks in how they are able to see and understand themselves: "These people, white people, were living under a lie. More, they were, in some profound way, suffering from the lie" (Coates, 2024, p. 169). In the same vein as Baldwin, Coates refers to the pain that underscores whiteness, in being complicit in a social order that has illegitimately given some power and made others victims—that keeps so many from actually confronting and coming to terms with this truth.

From a psychoanalytical perspective, Frantz Fanon determined that allegiance to whiteness not only made it clear someone was incapable of critical thinking in regards to race but also corrupted the soul of those who bought into it (Drustrup, 2021). Racism is presented as a form of spiritual abuse, harming everyone involved, even the one causing harm, though to a much lesser extent than the targets of racial harm (Jealous & Haskell, 2013). The emotional and psychological impact of witnessing racial injustice as a white person without interfering has a cost, including the internalization of shame, guilt, and despair. Even for those who do not seem to share a conscious concern for the impacts of racism, studies are concluding that carrying prejudice in and of itself has medical health implications for white people, as it sets off bodily signals that damage the heart and other muscles, as well as the immune system (Wilkerson, 2020). As Wilkerson states, "The act of moving about and navigating spaces with those whom society has trained us to believe are inherently different from us is killing people, and not just the targets" (2020, p. 304).

Fragility of Whiteness

Rather than risk ostracization and work against what has been heavily socialized, many white people make the choice—either consciously or unconsciously—to be complicit with domination and denial (Helms, 2020). Helms concludes that due to the fragile nature of such denial, white people will not be able to develop a positive racial identity that is psychologically healthy unless they recognize and uncouple from racism. The shift to make whiteness visible leads to a deep sense of dislocation for white people that will require psychological scaffolding to rebuild (Stovall, 2019).

Helms (2020) highlights the danger of basing self-worth on something over which one does not have any control, which is the case for race. Such a foundation, based on unrecognized

racial attributes, will make it even harder for someone to recover or disentangle their worthiness when privilege is identified or uncovered. Whiteness has been depicted as a "fantasy of wholeness that attempts to avoid any feelings of lack, vulnerability, or humiliation" (Suchet, 2014, p. 201). Like so many other psychological issues, addressing the root of the problem will require a painful admission and rebuilding, but to continue going on without addressing the harms and violence being caused will not keep the pain at bay.

Acknowledging the existence of the racial hierarchy in Western society undermines some of the most revered but also false ideals of equal opportunity, freedom, and earned merit (Adams, 2015). For a white person, realization of complicity with whiteness or even white supremacy often results in a fracturing, both a self-loathing and a desire to disown the legacy that they have inherited and claim some sort of innocence (Suchet, 2014). With this in mind, how might the therapeutic relationship between white counsellors and white clients be engaged to support these realizations in a way that can promote and encourage anti-racist thinking and behaviour?

Addressing Whiteness in Counselling

Psychotherapy is overwhelmingly dominated by white professionals and caters to white clients, although this centering of whiteness is rarely noticed by white counsellors working with clients whom they perceive as white (Drustrup, 2021; Merson, 2021; Miller & Josephs, 2009). In fact, it is often only when others who have been determined as non-white, such as BIPOC clients or counsellors, prevail to enter that *some* white people will recognize for whom therapeutic spaces are built. Due to the intentional invisibility of white privilege and the benefits it confers on those in power, there is huge resistance to changing whether or how this is acknowledged (Malamed, 2021; Wilcox, 2023).

Unexamined or unspecified white privilege in the therapy room can contribute to racial gaslighting and harm in the wider world (Hoffman, 2023; Levine, 2022). Even—or perhaps especially—if all participants identify as white, the importance of undermining white supremacy scripts around meritocracy and individualism is necessary to help those benefitting from racial oppression to understand their implicit or explicit guilt/ weight/discomfort (Wilcox, 2023). The privilege of being white in our white-dominant society means that white people never experience "otherness", which masquerades as living in a de-racialized world (Burch, 2021). There is a role for white counsellors to help their white clients see that white privilege is the "invisible" water they are swimming in (Adams, 2015).

Malamed (2021) highlights how important it is for white practitioners to make the issue of whiteness explicit in the consulting room, even (and perhaps particularly) when it has not explicitly raised as an issue in therapy. Both research and ethical standards highlight social justice as a responsibility of the counselling profession, but how does this get practically addressed when the client's goals are not aligned with a social justice lens? The final chapter of this project aims to provide a framework to help white counsellors work through how they might address this question and make decisions about appropriate interventions, based on the insights and offerings of BIPOC psychology experts.

Another aspect of whiteness in counselling is that both practitioner and client are likely to share experiences of shame and guilt around unearned privilege or implicit bias. Even counsellors and clients who share social justice values will struggle with and experience uncomfortable moments in examining racially motivated thinking (Burch, 2021). The impulse for a white therapist to reassure a white client that any harm caused was not intentional, rather than delve into the impact their actions might have had, is rooted in how whiteness protects

itself—keeping people from potential learning and transformation for fear of being labelled as racist (Wilcox, 2023). This protective feature can also invoke countertransference in an intensive way for white counsellors, recruiting them to comfort the client because the racial bias or thought the client has raised is one that the counsellor has experienced as well. In order to address racism in the therapy room, it is necessary for counsellors to work through their own understanding of their white racial identity in order to manage their own discomfort with surfacing whiteness (Levine, 2022).

Social Justice Training in Counselling

A number of studies have compiled competencies related to anti-oppression and social justice through surveys of counselling practitioners or instructors. Baima and Sude (2020) convened a panel of diversity experts to identify what mental health care professionals needed to know about whiteness, resulting in a list of 162 items that encompassed understanding how whiteness shows up in social and professional contexts, personal growth required of white health care professionals, and evidence of personal and professional growth. This list offers some examples of competencies to which white counsellors might aspire, including integrating knowledge of race and oppression to inform practice, attunement to verbal and non-verbal communication across cultures, and initiating conversations about race with clients.

Brown et al. (2019) looked at social justice training topics for counsellors as recounted by practicing counsellors in Ontario. Responses were grouped into six areas: self-awareness, critical consciousness, political influence on clinical work, social responsibility, community activism, and personal style. Self-awareness and positionality came up in a number of other studies compiled from other sources as well. As Malamed (2021) succinctly identifies, “the disavowal of this positionality *is* the harm, and should be understood as such in order to develop the capacity

to think about one's role in the system" (p. 152). Other studies similarly offer competencies such as white counsellors being able to sit with the guilt and shame of implications where they have been complicit with racial oppression, and to also expand their racial literacy (Drustrup, 2020; Merson, 2021).

Analysis of outcomes of current social justice training in counselling psychology programs highlight that there is a lack of evidence of actual change that counsellors are making to uphold anti-racism in their practices (Wilcox et al., 2024). In a study of counselling psychology students, Wilcox et al. found that both students and instructors reported that programs did not provide sufficient training in anti-racist paradigms, despite an institution's claims to elevate social justice. It was determined that most programs focus on multicultural knowledge without significant reference or attention to white supremacy, and that institutions were failing to put these taught ideals into practice in their operations. The need for programs to move beyond egalitarianism to critically analyze the underlying power differentials that whiteness upholds, and to undermine its operation in counselling programs themselves, is critical. Bartoli et al. (2015) express that counselling training programs must be working actively to name and address systemic racism as it comes up in classrooms, administration and oversight, as well as at placement sites and in the wider community.

Inter-Racial Dyads in Brief

While it is largely outside the scope of this project, it feels imperative to add some shared guidance for white counsellors working with BIPOC clients, as multicultural or cultural competence training proves to be largely unsuccessful in providing the competence it claims (Wilcox et al., 2024). When working with BIPOC clients, it is the responsibility of the white therapist to name race and recognize that they cannot fully appreciate the experience of

Blackness or another race, and to acknowledge that—beyond remaining silent upon witnessing harms outside the therapy session—there are occasions where the therapist themselves exerts prejudice or bias (Long et al., 2020). As white therapists, we are called to "bear the pain of shifting between the potential to retraumatize and the potential to heal, and to be willing to do so even as the patient grapples with conflict and ambivalence of talking about racial difference, trauma, and suffering" (Tummala-Narra, 2020, p. 740).

Long et al. (2020) highlight that racial healing is possible in the interpersonal interactions of therapy, but that it is essential to appreciate that risks are significantly higher for the racialized client compared to the white therapist. The onus on the white therapist is to be working on their own racial understanding in order to do the least harm and provide a safe enough environment, should the client choose to continue working with them. The recommendations in Chapter three for addressing whiteness with white clients require personal work for the counsellor that will also benefit BIPOC clients and colleagues; however, this is only part of the work required to provide safer counselling spaces for BIPOC communities.

Anti-Racist Practices and Interventions in Counselling

Several studies offer frameworks or adaptations of a specific modality, such as existentialism, in order to address racism in counselling (Drustrup, 2021; Grzanka et al., 2019; Hochman & Suyemoto, 2020; Hoffman, 2023; Miller et al., 2018; Wilcox, 2023). While only half of these studies make reference in some way to Helms' work on racial identity development, all seek to foster similar outcomes. Some common interventions include making the intentionally invisible visible, naming and confronting white supremacy as the systemic and structural basis for racism, and truly understanding intersectionality to appreciate the complexity of how racism interacts with multiple other identities and oppressions. While some of these frameworks provide

additional context and potential methods for conveying these interventions, none were found to provide the foundational groundwork that Helms' model does, which will be articulated further in Chapter three.

An essential understanding conveyed in the research is the importance to white people of addressing racism not only for justice and the benefit of BIPOC, but also for their own wellbeing, as described earlier in this chapter. The underpinnings of white supremacy in collaboration with patriarchal capitalism give an illusion of power to all who fall under whiteness; however, public health research identifies that despite individual, structural, and systemic privilege, white people experience negative physical and psychological repercussions directly linked to whiteness, which in fact hurts everyone (Drustrup, 2021; Wilcox, 2023). These findings point to the responsibility of white counsellors to help white clients identify and process racial bias for their own wellbeing. As has been proclaimed by numerous BIPOC leaders and justice organizers, the liberation of BIPOC and white people is intertwined. Working against white supremacy is the psychologically healthy way forward for us all.

Chapter Three: Discussion, Application, and Reflection

The first and second chapter of this project pulled together research and rationales that confirm white therapists can and do have a role in addressing whiteness in the therapy room. This final chapter offers insight for how that might occur, what can help guide the way, and where white counsellors can find further guidance. Learning from the work of BIPOC scholars who have offered ample expertise, white counsellors can robustly incorporate these teachings in our practice to help address racial trauma and engage in our own racial healing (Wilcox, 2023). I have set key concepts from Janet E. Helms, Prentis Hemphill, and Kai Cheng Thom apart from the literature review, sharing them in the following application section to demonstrate the inextricability of theory and practice. To contextualize the following sections, whose concepts flow throughout between education and integration, I have imagined them as mutually reinforcing theories and teachings with the following general framing: 1) Helms' model as *what* guides our work as white therapists in racial identity development, 2) Hemphill's embodiment practice as *how* we engage in this work, and 3) Thom's Window of Transformation identifying *where* the opportunity for change to take place exists. To further orient the reader, I open this chapter with a preview of how I have chosen to weave together these authors' work to offer practical possibilities for addressing racist thoughts, feelings, and behaviours in counselling.

As a white researcher and counselling student, any misinterpretations or maladaptation in the integration of wisdom and concepts from these three experts is mine alone. I assume Hemphill and Thom might have some general familiarity with Helms' work, given their therapeutic backgrounds, and I know they have great respect for each other and their mutual contributions (as both shared when Thom was a guest on Hemphill's podcast, *Becoming the People,* released in July 2024). My hope is to offer some exposure to readers who might not

otherwise have come across these models and modalities. It has been a hugely beneficial pursuit to sit with and co-mingle these offerings and consider how to integrate them into my life and practice, as I will further articulate in the reflection section at the end of this chapter.

Helms, Hemphill, and Thom: Beginnings of a Theory-Application Framework

While some research from the preceding literature review offers case studies and specific recommendations for responding to white privilege and bias, it largely relies on gained awareness and competence of white therapists to identify and hold the discomfort of confronting racism. There is little to no guidance as to how a counsellor might evaluate and build up these capacities. In this regard, the most comprehensive model to date remains Helms' (2020) Model of White Racial Identity which outlines a set of phases through which white people become aware of racial identity and how evolution of said identity might reduce harm caused. Helms' model is not so much a map or checklist but instead a gauge and guide, offering insight regarding where a client might exist in their white racial identity development and thus how a counsellor might proceed in encouraging racial self-awareness. The model also offers an invaluable framework through which counsellors—myself included—might reflect on where they stand in their own racial identity journey, which I examine in the closing section of this chapter.

To better appreciate and integrate the racial identity realities that Helms outlines, I turn to Hemphill's (2024) work on somatic grounding. To be able to feel, Hemphill posits, enables us to authentically show up in relationship and take responsibility for harms that our thoughts, behaviours, and actions have caused others and ourselves. Hemphill offers embodiment practices that can help white counsellors and clients remain present in the work that is necessary for individual and collective accountability and healing.

Finally, to be embodied and open to change, we need to monitor both openness and resistance in ourselves and others in order to grow in this work. Thom (2022) provides additional guidance with her Window of Transformation that encapsulates the opportunities and pitfalls for such transformations that Helms and Hemphill set out to support. With this model, we can track whether the client or counsellors ourselves are operating in our window or if we might have slipped beyond it, where performative change or destructive conflict can occur, and practice ways to set us back on course.

Application: Bringing Whiteness into the Conversation

How might this work show up in the therapy room? First, and importantly, white counsellors contend with their own racism and white racial identity development and how these impact their personal and professional thoughts, feelings, and actions. Beyond this, there are many ways in which clients' clinical goals or related experiences can be entangled with their whiteness. There may be instances of conflict with a colleague or a family member who has identified the client as being out of line in their racial thinking, especially in the current political landscape. Or there might be a deep feeling of insecurity or unfairness from a white client who feels unsuccessful or unworthy, where white privilege can come to the surface. Interracial relationships might bring such issues to the forefront, as well as well-intentioned white people working in equity fields, finding that their behaviours are not in synch with their ethics and who are willing to delve into why this is the case. There might be someone who shares a racist thought or belief in the course of other therapeutic work; determining how to attend to it will be a contextual negotiation for a white counsellor. The frameworks and theories shared in the following sections are intended to make action more possible and effective in any of these situations, as well as many others.

What Guides the Work: Helms on White Identity Development

Helms (2020) provides white racial identity theory to express how a white person conceptualizes – or fails to conceive – their own racial identification. Her model of white identity development is not only informative for white counsellors to consider where a client might sit in the process of developing their white racial identity, but also where white counsellors might locate ourselves in the model. Helms depicts two phases in development of white racial identity: the first involves *internalizing racism* and the second focuses on *evolving to a nonracist white identity*. Each phase has three possible statuses or schemas, though like many human systems, movement between the schemas may not be linear: "the phases of identity reflect fluid, changeable constructs rather than discrete, linear, stepwise, mutually exclusive stages" (Helms, 2020, p. 29). The schemas under the first phase of *internalizing racism* include contact, disintegration, and reintegration, and in the second phase of *evolving non-racist identity*, the three schemas are pseudo-independence, immersion/emersion, and autonomy.

Due to how ubiquitous racism is in our society and the systems we live within, the beginning of white identity development must be bound up with *internalizing racism*—that is, recognizing it first as an "out-there" phenomenon and then as one in which one is actively complicit. Contact is the initial schema in this phase, when it first becomes apparent to a white person that race exists (Helms, 2020). As there is incentive for white people to ignore or deny the existence of any racial hierarchy to avoid consciously identifying their privilege, contact as a state is challenging to maintain without some kind of deflection. Claiming "colour-blindness" is one such defense that can be galvanized for a white person to not shift their racial awareness any further and to remain with this schema, denying that race plays any role in lived experiences or social outcomes.

If a person instead persists in newfound racial awareness, they might identify with the second schema of disintegration. This state Helms (2020) describes as characterized by confusion, where a white person becomes aware that to remain aligned in the expected social order with other white people, they must accept that those of other races will be treated immorally. Disintegration is a point in racial identity development where there are multiple directions a person might shift based on their response; it is a choice-point in how to deal with the unveiled reality of racism. The primary options are to surrender to the social pressure and privilege of internalized racism by proceeding to the reintegration schema, or to shift consciousness toward the evolving non-racist identity side of the model.

In the reintegration schema, a person addresses the confusion of disintegration by distorting reality, putting blame for the racial hierarchy on BIPOC people as deserving of marginalized conditions in society rather than on white people who keep these conditions in place for their own benefit (Helms, 2020). Reintegration is the schema that protects whiteness, offering self-deceptions to help white people deal with the inner turmoil of each racial incident of which they become aware. To remain in this mindset, a narrative is created to somehow "justify" the outcome by blaming victims of racism for their own oppression.

If the moral confusion of the disintegration schema incites a white person to interrogate rather than deny their privilege and its impact, they might move towards *evolving non-racist identity* (Helms, 2020). The first schema in this phase of white identity development is pseudo-independence. A white person enacting pseudo-independence now recognizes the implications of the racial hierarchy in socio-political conditions but has not yet integrated a belief system enabling them to take responsibility for upholding racism. They demonstrate an intellectualized understanding of racism, but not a felt conviction for taking personal action. People might

remain in this schema to avoid conscious exposure to the full extent of racism's history and ongoing violence.

Evolving to the next schema, immersion-emersion, involves a willingness to unlearn and be re-educated on the costs of whiteness and role of white supremacy, both historically and currently. Immersion-emersion, in Helms' own words, is when "the person assumes personal responsibility for racism and develops a realistic awareness for the assets and deficits of being white" (2020, p. 29). Once this awareness is gained, one must connect and share this unlearning with other willing white people in order to stay sensitized to the process and not fall back into racist thinking. Helms identifies the challenges for connection that white people in this schema will also face:

> Realistic self-appraisal forces the white person to confront the loneliness and isolation of being a consciously positively white person in a white society that denies and distorts the significance of race and the societies of People of Colour, who have historically based reasons to be suspicious of consciously white people. (2020, p. 29)

While the final schema, autonomy, articulates the concept of a non-racist white identity, it is meant not as an ending but an ever-evolving arrival. Autonomy involves a person feeling secure with their white racial identity: they can nurture their whiteness in a way that is morally aligned to their values and not tied to racism. It is a self-concept that does not require emotional labour from People of Colour to commend or validate their status as a non-racist white person. Instead, this person engages and works collaboratively with BIPOC people for the collective experience and growth of engaging with others of diverse races. Identifying with this schema does not make a person a virtuous human or otherwise enlightened; rather, autonomy offers a

commitment to the process of discovering positive ways to show up as a white person, which is a lifelong pursuit.

Integrating White Identity Development in Counselling

It is essential for white counsellors to hone their capacity for self-reflection and self-awareness to address racial issues in their work (Adams, 2015). A stance of critical self-compassion (Wilcox, 2013) can foster capacity to hold off reactive impulse to revert to Helms' phase of *internalizing racism*. Maintaining compassion for self alongside reflection and awareness equips white counsellors to navigate the pain that often comes with evolving into a non-racist identity. Holding these capacities for self enables white practitioners to also offer them for clients.

Helms' (2020) model offers a guide to track where we or others might be in our process of racial identity development. Helms also provides numerous self-surveys and concrete examples in her book to help discern the different schemas and describes how to foster growth from varying starting points. Such work not only helps white counsellors to conceptualize their own racial self-actualization, but to consider with which schemas clients might be aligned when confronting or distorting white privilege. For example, in both disintegration and pseudo-independence states, support and reflection with a counsellor could help a client shift to a schema that offers greater alignment with their values and lessens inner tension. The following section outlines techniques and interventions from the literature that help support white identity development in the counselling sphere.

Before counsellors can support white clients reckoning with racist thoughts and behaviours, they must have at least begun their own racial identity work—thus building motivation and comfort while reducing defensiveness (Drustrup, 2021). Beyond building

therapist capacity, the first step in Drustrup's process includes creating a trusting relationship in which a client's struggle with a racial issue is met with empathy. Empathy does not involve agreeing with the client's opinion outright but maintaining the therapeutic alliance with compassion for a client struggling in their racial awareness. Similarly, Anen (2022a) prescribes sustained mirroring and curiosity as a client struggles with racist sentiment, fostering an ability to tolerate and attend to "useful" shame. This creates more favourable conditions for exploring the client's racial consciousness; informed by Helms' model, a counsellor can gauge with which schema a client might be most aligned and thus whether education or embodiment (discussed below) could be a fruitful path toward evolving racial identity development.

A further step in Drustrup's (2021) model is to connect racial issues to the concerns that brought the client to counselling in the first place: to make racial identity salient in the client's life. This is not an attempt to force the client to address racism but to help them see how their implicit bias or beliefs are undermining their self-construct and emotional wellbeing. Depending on which schema of white identity development a client is occupying, this might be planting an initial seed of consideration, or a deeper dive into how their life has been impacted by lacking racial consciousness. As discussed in the literature review and in Helms' model, upholding racism (whether consciously or unconsciously) is not neutral; it causes moral harm for white people, despite its benefits to whiteness. Where this consciousness is achieved, Drustrup notes, counsellors can support clients to pursue greater racial awareness, which once again can be enhanced by Helms' model—helping clients identify capacity-building supports and actions associated with their current schema.

Role of Shame and White Guilt

In clinical practice, shame and white guilt are important sources of information to help guide white clients (Adams, 2015; Levine, 2022; Staker, 2022; Suchet, 2014). The potential for shame to either provoke shutdown or open space from which something new can emerge speaks to the choice point of the disintegration schema—to either move into reintegration (and continue internalizing racism) or shift towards a non-racist identity (Levine, 2022). There is an opportunity to step into the vulnerability of shame, to be implicated—not just as a client but as a practitioner as well—allowing for an embracing of other experiences that cannot otherwise be felt. White shame can serve as a "pilot light," inviting us into an opportunity to expand into a better version of ourselves (Staker, 2022). Shame offers an indispensable key to accessing white racial consciousness. As Suchet (2004) writes, "race haunts our consciousness" (p. 436); in reckoning with our identity, "we cannot afford to dissociate the shame and guilt we carry as a consequence of being the oppressors, historically and currently" (Suchet, 2004, p. 436-437).

White guilt is also conceptualized as an alarm system, alerting white people to ways in which they are acting out of step with, or feigning ignorance of situations that starkly violate, their values (Adams, 2015). Where the reality of white privilege is that "we benefit despite ourselves, despite our beliefs, values, and ideals" (Suchet, 2014, p. 206), shame and guilt help mitigate any sense of an idealized self, keeping us accountable to ongoing evolution of white racial identity. Using these identifiers to explore racial consciousness, "white guilt," Adams (2015) writes, "can be thought of as the heart speaking, and as indicating an awareness of connection and concern for the experiences of another" (p. 338).

In some counselling modalities, shame and guilt are seen as inhibitory emotions that act to block more core emotions such as fear, anger, and grief (Jacobs Hendel, 2018). What is

offered on the other side of addressing these core feelings in working together as white therapists and white clients is greater alignment and attunement between our values and actions. While the work is challenging, like many issues undertaken in therapy, the reward is individually large and collectively massive. And as white counsellors, the responsibility is ours. As Evans Holmes (2022), an African American scholar-clinician, argues:

> Only when the one with white privilege can encounter someone else who may also have it but is willing to recognize and process it as a shared experience and make it into a dance they do, is there a chance to come out of the darkness of white privilege and hatred and into the light of loving inclusiveness." (p. 643)

How We Do the Work: Hemphill on Embodiment

Whether or not Helms' (2020) model of white identity development rings true for a white counsellor—if it raises defenses, sets off echoes of truth, or is wholly embraced—it will make little difference if it only takes hold in the mind, remaining theoretical or conceptual. Helms herself offers the advice that "examining your emotions as they occur is the first step toward better racial adjustments" (2020, p. xiv). This connection between feeling our emotions and overcoming racial injustice is centred by Hemphill (2024), who posits that empathy and mutuality can help undo the imposed order of white privilege and power. Hemphill refers to the split that was created when the mind was given supremacy over feelings: non-feeling became a mark of being "civilized," while feelings made people "wild" (p. 66). Resisting this dichotomy carries potential for transformation. When we're willing to face the realities of our history and to feel—undefended—the depth of the emotions that brings up, we can change.

Allyship and Innocence

Essential to understanding the pain of others is the ability to sit with our own pain: "we must first be able to feel grief, our own, before we can truly become an ally to anyone else. We have to know what it is to have lost" (Hemphill, 2024, p. 132). By withdrawing from feelings due to discomfort, or covering them up because we consider our pain irrelevant or unimportant, we miss an opportunity to connect with the pain of others in an authentic way. We cannot keep ourselves safe from or unaware of our own pain if we want to help others with theirs. When that pain includes intergenerational trauma and harm caused by white ancestors to those made vulnerable by racial hierarchies, neither bypassing nor undermining the emotions associated with that legacy serves the collective.

Conflict, including in the racial realm, makes it even harder to attune to what is happening in our bodies (Hemphill, 2025). In reactive discomfort, white people may retreat to a protective and oversimplified binary in which white people are either innocent or guilty, good or evil, when it comes to racialized issues; this binary keeps us from being able to act in the nuance of complex situations. As Hemphill (2024) articulates, "innocence, as our society uses it, is not a concept created for true safety and care. It is mostly a way to safeguard against responsibility" (p. 153). The fear of being found guilty or associated with evil can overwhelm a person's capacity to understand or empathize, pushing them into defensiveness that further protects the binary and keeps hierarchies of power in place.

A culture of accountability is required for allyship, one in which we need not deny others' needs and pain in order to protect ourselves (Hemphill, 2024). With practice, rather than inhibiting unsettled feelings, we can use them as guides to be vulnerable, to acknowledge, and to repair. Key to this practice is not cognitive understanding, but embodiment:

> We don't really change on account of good ideas, no matter how much we might wish to, or because we hope to be perceived as politically correct, or even because we truly want to find a way to make things better. Instead, we change because we have surrendered with our bodies to feeling something new, to expanding our capacity to experience a wider range of emotions, to deepen our relationships, and to open our awareness. (Hemphill, 2025, p. 132)

Where Change Can Occur: Thom on Transformation

In the effort to address whiteness in counselling, I have thus far discussed understanding the schemas we and our clients might be holding and helping to embody strong feelings that arise. However, given the high potential for defensiveness when it comes to identifying racism in ourselves and others, it is additionally useful to consider *where* change can best take place. To learn and grow, we must be in an embodied state that allows us to remain open and curious (Hemphill, 2024). Consistent with this assumption, Thom's (2022) Window of Transformation offers guidance on opportunities for healing-based transformation through reframing the Window of Tolerance model originally developed by Siegel (1999) with adaptations by Ogden et al. (2006). In Thom's adapted model, fight/flight is framed as *destructive conflict,* fawn/submit is labelled as *performative change,* and collapse/disassociate is aligned with *fragility*.[1]

Thom's Window of Transformation provides a framework for understanding where we show up in change work and how we might need to shift for transformation to truly take root (2022). When a perceived threat of being bad or wrong floods our system, responses can vary from conflict (fight/flight) to performative appeasement (fawn/submit) to fragility

[1] For a visual depiction of this model and Thom's detailed characteristics of each of these zones, please visit https://ariseembodiment.org/2022/04/05/the-window-of-transformation/

(collapse/dissociation). Thom (2022) points to how the prospect of a perceived crisis—such as being accused of racial thinking—can result in conflict or disconnection, potentially triggering a position of victimhood (cf. Hemphill's [2025] description of the propensity to seek innocence). Remaining in or returning to the transformational realm requires "access to basic needs, personal healing and support" (Thom, 2022, p. 1) and an adequate sense of safety. Some such needs can be attended to in a therapeutic relationship and actively pursued or practiced, increasing capacity to understand and transform our racial identity.

Importance of Belonging

We cannot practice undoing our own racial bias or acknowledging white privilege if we are concerned that any admission or failure would result in being isolated or evicted from belonging. The Window of Transformation provides embodied cues to sense where our capacity or that of our clients might be before engaging in transformational practice. People must feel safe enough in their connections in order to learn and change (Hemphill, 2025). And while fear of losing access to a sense of belonging might bring people into performative change, Thom's (2022) model outlines how such commitments are unlikely to be to be rooted in transformation—and thus unlikely to be kept.

As white counsellors, we have the opportunity to be the connection, through the therapeutic alliance, that helps a client feel safe enough to examine their internalized bias and racist behaviours. The ability to stay accountable, to receive and appreciate feedback, and to feel enough mutual and self-respect to engage in real discourse and growth all characterize the transformational window. These are experiences that can be offered and encouraged, though not forced, in the therapy room. Using the Window of Transformation to recognize when a client or the counsellor themself is acting from a place of fragility, performative change, or destructive

conflict also helps signal where transformational work might not be accessible, and what conditions might need strengthening to return to such work. When either client or counsellor feels under threat or disconnected, drawing attention to this state and addressing the emotions behind it can help keep the process flowing, even in small increments of change at a time.

Key Principles to Guide Practice

Overlaying the Window of Transformation (Thom, 2022) with the Model of White Identity Development (Helms, 2020) yields a conceptual map of a client's current racial identity status and the capacity they might be able to access to discuss or develop that identity. An embodied approach (Hemphill, 2024) is what helps us support clients and ourselves in the challenging terrain of discussing and developing a positive white racial identity, one committed to uncoupling from racism. This is a non-linear and ongoing process for both client and counsellor, and the concepts shared so far are some initial considerations for this journey.

The most important message to share from this research is the invitation and permission to start—imperfectly, without all the answers or assurances, knowing that you will make mistakes. Like so many other topics sequestered with shame and guilt, whiteness and racism are too infrequently addressed by those who have the power to shift them, yet we are ready and willing to address most other topics in counselling. While there is no checklist or manual to address every situation, may these models offer white counsellors some encouragement and framing, or at least the impetus to seek out other offerings. As a brief review of some key principles for practice woven throughout this chapter, I offer the following:

- Critical compassion
- Generative use of guilt and shame
- Grounding in embodied emotion

- Building the window of transformation
- Orienting to belonging
- Developing a secure white identity

Reflections on My Whiteness

There is a very real and pressing case for this work given the current global escalations towards fascism, where we see white supremacy rising to the surface in places it was previously hidden or denied. While I am not suggesting that therapy can help deal with the most extreme cases, the more we can collectively mobilize against such forces as people unwilling to be implicated in fascist systems, the better our future prospects. However, I do not want to base such an invitation in fear alone, because this work is rooted in love and freedom.

Instead, I want to imagine recognizing our whiteness as the end of a harmful relationship. While the loss of perceived "innocence" invokes sadness, there is also much to gain as our relationship to racism transitions and ideally ends, and relief in the admission that the system has been rigged in our favour rather than trying to hold up falsehoods—no longer asserting we are worthy or better based on such a problematic and harmful premise, but newly able to see who we and others are in all our humanity. With the ongoing awareness of unearned privilege comes an alignment with knowing what was always under the surface, and a deeper invitation to understanding ourselves, our perceptions, and our worldview. As with all discomfort, addressing the fear and sadness that are blanketed by white guilt and shame allows for an immense awakening and connectivity with self and others on the other side.

Helms' (2020) model is both disarmingly simply yet can set off considerable defense and discomfort for a white person; I feel it in myself. Autonomy is a difficult schema for me to imagine, which is a solid indication that I have never experienced it. I can identify with the

immersion-emersion schema and particularly with the loneliness that comes with an awareness in which others are not willing to share. There is excitement in finding a model that so clearly portrays ways in which white people can find a more solid footing, and yet the effort required to stay aware and resist reintegration is significant. And while there may not be a final resting point for positive white identity, the integrity of the pursuit is what offers meaning and purpose. It is in this integrated self-concept and in the relationships and community that this work brings with it that hope can be nourished, as well as connection and solidarity that ideally one day, outside our time here, might bring liberation for all.

In my own journey, I have had so many people who have held me and offered insights as I developed my white racial identity. Some of the ways I found to connect with the immersion-emersion schema (and return to it as best I can) involve deep listening, following BIPOC artists and experts in areas of my interest and beyond, paying attention to times my fragility or performative propensity flared, finding other white people willing and able to discuss white supremacy, and accepting that I will continually be learning. I have also continued causing harm, feeling shame and seeking absolution from BIPOC friends and colleagues, over-apologizing, and falling back into racial thinking. A vision like Helms' (2020) autonomy schema had not even occurred to me before reading her work. The idea of a positive white racial identity still makes me cringe, and yet I appreciate the assignment. Even completing this project has felt performative at times, and I can see how working to become even slightly more settled in my white identity will benefit me and others in my life. Finding aspects of white culture with which I identify and in which I can feel rooted will be a whole other project, but I know there are white authors and theorists helping to pick the good from the commons outside of the colonial techno-patriarchal late-stage capitalist society we are sold as "culture."

One final note I want to underscore from Hemphill (2025) is their book's focus on practice: "practice is the portal for change" (p. 167). They speak to how we make choices every day about what we focus on and whom we open or close ourselves off to; embodied practice offers a chance to be intentional about who—and how—we want to become. Even in this offering, I see opportunities to build a white culture of which I want to be part; I am reminded of the importance of focusing on what I want white culture to be rather than fixating on what I do not want it to be. The invitation is to work through the fear and sadness, refusing to become stuck there, so I can access hope and love as my primary motivations.

I cannot more highly recommend Helms' and Hemphill's books, as well as Thom's offerings. All three articulate many more insights and lessons than can be expressed in this project and are more eloquently and authentically held in their own containers. Helms' book, in fewer than 100 pages, also offers several self-assessment and reflective exercises that enhance and clarify her ideas. I can make no more compelling case than Hemphill's invitation to heal, Thom's to transform, and Helms' closing exhortation, shared in her epilogue, which I reproduce here as a final consideration for our white clients and ourselves:

> To me development of a positive white identity means:
>
> - the white person can look in the mirror and like and respect the reflected person;
> - the white person can look in the mirror and see a white person without also seeing guilt, anger, and confusion;
> - the white person can know that he or she obtains privilege and benefits from society because he or she "was qualified" rather than because she or he was the "best" colour;
> - the white person can approach the world from a mentally healthy perspective rather than having to deny, distort, or avoid the realities of the world;

- the white person can learn to pity those who can only love themselves by hating others;
- the white person can be a person who does not survive via hatred;
- the white person will be a more complete human being.

Perhaps these goals are not worth the risk. Perhaps they are. Unfortunately, one can never know which alternative is true if one does not begin the growth process. So, growthful journey! (Helms, 2020, p. 82)

Further Reading and Guidance

For white counsellors seeking wider perspectives, experiences, and worldviews, there are authors like Helm (2020) and Menakem (2017) who speak directly to white people through a psychological or therapeutic lens; there are authors including hooks (2000), brown (2024), Wilkerson (2020), and Hemphill (2024) who write to a broader audience that at times includes or directly addresses white readers and elsewhere orients to readers with shared identities. Coates (2024) writes that he intentionally thinks of the white reader as little as possible to resist any urge to translate what he is sharing in a way that might undermine the message. Nonetheless, he still finds white readers who are able to take in and apply the teachings and connect to his experience. As an invitation for white counsellors who pick up *Decolonizing Therapy* (Mullan, 2023) or *Decolonizing Trauma Work* (Linklater, 2014): when a text is not written directly to our lived experience, we always have the option not only to read for the messages and translate them to our own contexts, and may also benefit from an accompanying learning about how BIPOC audiences have always had to read white-centred syllabi throughout white-dominant settings.

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