

Pathways to Diversity for White Males:
A study of white males' learning experiences
on the path towards advocating for inclusion and equity

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Dissertation Executive Summary

This qualitative case study examines the learning journeys of eight white males who are advocates for inclusion and equity in organizations. The inquiry focuses on identifying and documenting successful pathways to advocacy in order to help accelerate learning for other white males in this arena.

Two areas of literature informed this study: literature on white males and diversity, and literature on learning, change and transformation. The dissertation also served as a test of transformative learning theory.

Seven external consultants and one sociology professor were identified as advocates, utilizing nominations from 24 senior organization development practitioners. The selected advocates received nominations from all four nominator categories: women of color, white women, men of color, and white men. Those interviewed, all of whom chose to waive confidentiality, included: Michael Brazzel, Michael Burkart, Mark Chesler, Dennis DaRos, Rob Neal, Ed Olson, Bo Razak, and Joe Potts. Following personal interviews with advocates, individual stories were compiled and common themes were identified.

While the full dissertation contains five- to nine-page accounts of each advocate's unique journey, discussion here is limited to commonalities among advocate journeys. First, each advocate described an early background which included either experiencing, observing, or participating in discrimination. While these events were not always apparent to them at the time, this backdrop later served as an important context for reflection and learning while integrating values of inclusion and equity into their lives. This reflection increased as advocates became ready to transcend the beliefs, values, and ideologies of their upbringings.

This transcendence was catalyzed by advocates' intentional and unintentional exposure to differences. Close contact with people of different races, genders, and other categories of difference came from a variety of sources and helped create new ways of knowing and seeing the world. Correspondingly, learning accelerated when advocates moved beyond a focus on self, gaining group and systemic perspectives of diversity issues. This included an acceptance of themselves as members of the white male category.

The most striking discovery of this study was a universal shift from exposure to difference to actively building relationships across categories of difference. These relationships provided critical support *and* challenge for intensified learning, and thus played an important role in accelerating the transition toward advocacy. Advocates described these relationships as "pivotal", "validating", "affirming", "the best part of this work".

One advocate described the impact in this way:

“There is something about becoming friends with somebody who’s very different from you, in a personal way: ways where you’re vulnerable, in which people really are able to see all of who I am. It felt like [building these relationships] ratcheted my understanding, my ability to understand myself, and my willingness to take risks in relationships and in speaking out for what I felt was important.”

These relationships in turn created the support systems necessary to engage in the challenges and confrontations required for the depth of learning essential to move toward advocacy. All advocates found multiple sources of this challenge / support polarity through a variety of cross-category relationships.

Concurrently, there was a lack of white male role models in most of the advocates’ learning journeys. Relationships across categories of difference were clearly the primary source of learning and growth. Furthermore, it appears most of the advocates are still searching for better ways to connect with other white males. This implies a need for white males to find more effective ways to offer each other the challenge and support necessary for learning and growth, thereby lessening the burden for others.

While advocacy was woven into the identity of these white men in different forms, they all viewed it as an ongoing journey, rather than a destination:

“It’s about living fully.”

“This work is very soulful. It is supportive of who I am.”

“Advocacy is a core part of my identity.”

“It’s a calling for me.”

In reviewing the appropriateness of transformative learning theory, the advocates’ journeys did not follow the rational steps of this theory. Furthermore, transformative learning theory proved too individualistic to acknowledge the central role which relationships played in creating changes in consciousness. Other change theories, which are oriented more toward social aspects of change, better describe the critical role of relationships in the journeys of these advocates.

Michael Welp is the founder of EqualVoice. The full dissertation can be downloaded at www.equalvoice.com. Contact Michael Welp at 612.722.7610, or email him at michael@equalvoice.com.

Also, a book chapter entitled “The Treasures and Challenges of Diversity for White Males” is available in *Working Together: Creating Synergy Through Diversity*, a book edited by Angeles Arrien.

For information on *White Men as Full Diversity Partners* educational programs, coaching, and speaking on the topic of white men and diversity, visit www.equalvoice.com.