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School Leadership for Social Justice: A Critique of Starratt's Tripartite Model

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VALUES AND ETHICS IN EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATION

SCHOOL LEADERSHIP FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE: A CRITIQUE OF STARRATT'S TRIPARTITE MODEL

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Rather than treated as a discreet task or as an overarching orientation, leadership for social justice is more appropriately situated within a comprehensive theory of school administration, such as Starratt's (2003) model of leadership as cultivating meaning, responsibility, and community. Starratt's general model of educational leadership contextualizes social justice leadership practices in a broader context. The purpose of this article is to apply Starratt's model as an analytical lens to examine the practices of school leaders in schools that are focused on promoting social justice by reducing barriers to traditionally marginalized students. The multicase study reported here provides empirical evidence illustrating the strengths and limitations of this model as an analytic lens through which such leadership practices can be critiqued and improved.

Theoretical framework and methodology

Starratt (2003) grounds his model in theories of transformational leadership (Leithwood, 1992a, 1992b; Leithwood & Duke, 1999) and schools as learning organizations (Elmore, 2000). Explicitly building on Murphy's (2002a) syntheses of social justice, democratic community, and school improvement, Starratt crafts a tripartite model of educational leadership as cultivating responsibility (to promote social justice), community (to promote democracy), and meaning (to promote school improvement).

First, Starratt (2003) approaches meaning as socially and culturally bound and as relationally and experientially grounded. School leaders cultivate meaning by focusing on teaching and learning outcomes in schools, or the construction of meaning. Second, Starratt rejects the modernist notion of community as rooted in sameness as an inappropriate and inaccurate model for our pluralistic, postmodern society (Furman, 1998), asserting instead that school leaders cultivate community by fostering pluralistic sociality, collaborative civility, and participatory self-governance. Third, Starratt calls on school leaders to cultivate responsibility by attending to neglected issues

of social justice in the education of traditionally marginalized students and promoting values of justice, care, and critique. According to Starratt, effective leaders are critically observant, perceiving "the deeper dimensions of present situations" (p. 15) and theoretically grounded, able to "connect the immediate realities to a larger framework of meaning and value" (p. 15). Starratt's model is expansive: specific objectives, such as raising student achievement scores of summative assessments, are understood in the context of the larger goal, such as cultivating meaning.

I focus in this article on analyzing leadership practices of principals in three elementary schools serving significant numbers of students of low socio-economic status (i.e. greater than 60% qualifying for free or reduced price lunch). The majority of students in these urban Catholic schools were of color, though the racial composition and linguistic status varied widely (see Table 1). Data for this analysis is drawn from a larger multicase study conducted during one school year (Scanlan, 2005). I gathered data from interviews, observations, and archives. Interviews were conducted with each principal and triangulated with interviews of other school personnel, totaling an average of 14 research participants per school. I gathered additional data in the form of archival materials related to each school's enrollment trends, mission, policies and procedures of recruitment and retention, and funding and governance structures. Finally, I made observations during an average of six days of site visits in each school.

Findings

The three schools in this study (all names are pseudonyms) are St. Josephine Academy (JA), St. Gabriel Parish School (GPS), and St. Malachy School (MS). Serving significant numbers of traditionally marginalized students, each of these Catholic schools tends to follow the same racially segregated patterns of the public sector (Kozol, 2005; Orfield & Lee, 2005). Student enrollment data gathered in the course of this study indicated that these three schools are disproportionately composed of students of color as compared to other Catholic schools in the area. GPS is located in a neighborhood in transition from White to Latino, and many students' families are recent immigrants from Central and South America. JA is located in an area of extreme poverty and racial segregation and all the students are Black.[1] MS is more mixed across multiple dimensions of race ethnicity. MS and GPS have the highest concentration of students who are English language learners (ELL).

Table 1

Enrollment of Traditionally Marginalized Students				
School	Students in Poverty	Students with Disabilities	Students of Color	Students who are English Language Learners
JA	234/260 (90%)	26/260* (10%)	260/260 (100%)	0/260 (0%)
GPS	305/332 (92%)	31/305* (10%)	306/332 (93%)	295/332 (89%)
MS	248/370 (67%)	12/370** (3%)	311/370 (84%)	133/370 (36%)

* Estimate based on reported school data, diocesan data and diocesan estimates.
** Number of students with formal Individualized Education Plans. The school reports accommodating many students for exceptionalities without formalizing this into an official IEP.

The formal leadership structure in each of these schools lay on a continuum from solitary (JA) to shared (GPS) to broadly distributed (MS). At JA, Ms. Green, the principal, was in many ways a solitary leader. She has served as the only formal school leader for well over a decade, and been an educator in the school for three decades. By contrast, Sr. Elaine of GPS shared leadership with a number of individuals. Sr. Elaine, who had been principal for six years, sought funding to support an assistant principal (Diane), and also had a parish priest who helped oversee the school operations. Finally, leadership at MS was significantly distributed. Ms. Hart, the principal for the past four years, shared leadership responsibilities with an extensive team including an assistant principal (dean), a business officer, and a development director. With this context described, I now turn to apply Starratt's tripartite lens of cultivating responsibility, community, and meaning to these three cases.

Mission: moral responsibilities

The first leg of the three-legged stool Starratt (2003) constructs is cultivating responsibility. Starratt advocates that principals "bring a large vision of a responsible community to engage the whole school community in a conversation about how they might more intentionally and programmatically create a moral learning environment" (146). In the three schools in this multicase study, the school principals proactively framed the responsibility to serve the diversity of students in terms of serving the school's mission. The mission emerged as central compass guiding practices toward traditionally marginalized students. Table 2 illustrates commonalities of descriptors of each school's mission. For the purposes of illustration, I have selected quotes representative of viewpoints expressed by multiple research participants in response to

the prompt, "How would you describe the mission of the school in your own words?"

Table 2

Moral Responsibilities of the Mission		
School	Excerpts from Formal Mission Statements	Illustrative quote
JA	…nurture the body, mind, and spirit of each child … forge a partnership with our families … encourage the pursuit of excellence, enthusiasm for learning, pride of accomplishment, self discipline, and consideration for others	each student that comes in to have a better life than just accepting what comes to them…I would say coming in here, they have options, they have choices that they can choose to make… It's like someone else taking your hand and leading you- to the right perspective in life to better themselves…
GPS	…participates in the educational mission of the church and our parish by providing a Christian anti-racist environment for learning and teaching truth	I believe that because basically the main focus is to have an antiracist environment- and… we're trying to teach kids about the different heritages and different nationalities, and that even though we may be different we are still all human and the same in the basic form
MS	…we are committed to developing the spiritual, academic, social, physical and leadership gifts of all… we promote collaboration with families and the community in order to affirm and embrace our cultural diversity	to meet the needs of whatever child is presented to the school whatever kids show up we're going to try to teach…

Mission in practice. The formal mission statements reflect espoused theory, while the quotes hint at how these theories were applied in practice (Argyris & Schon, 1974). Site visits and archival documents generally bolstered the claim that the educators in these schools genuinely embraced their school's purpose as effectively educating all children, with a particular emphasis toward those who have traditionally been marginalized. These missions were both formally articulated and informally understood. In both GPS and MS the formal mission was promulgated widely and visibly throughout the school community. GPS had gone so far as to adapt the mission into the daily ritual of the school, with a student reading a prayer over the intercom and then the entire student body "pledging" allegiance to the mission. In MS as well as GPS the mission appeared on plaques and signage throughout the school, and research participants were conversant on the details of the school's formal mission. Though JA did not share this emphasis on the school's formal mission, descriptions of the lived mission from research participants did converge around common themes of "making sure that every student succeeds" and "serv[ing] every child, in spite of whatever their needs are, in spite of the troubles they might have had at [other] schools."

According to virtually all research participants, the practiced mission was directly connected to the manner in which the school principal led, again connecting to Starratt's (2003) theme of cultivating responsibility. In JA, one research participant who worked in several public and private schools in the area contrasted Ms. Green's approach with more deficit and racist orientations she experienced in other school leaders:

> There's very strong leadership here. You have leadership that wants the best for the students and teachers and uses everything it does as a partnership…You don't have people saying, "Oh those poor little black children, oh they don't know how to learn."

In GPS, the mission to be anti-racist was an outgrowth of intensive, formal, and ongoing professional development that Sr. Elaine initiated and sustained to help her mostly White staff examine how White privilege, power, and racism impacted students and families in the school, most of whom were people of color. The mission of MS to serve the students of the community grew from the emphasis of Ms. Hart over the past four years. As one teacher described, Ms. Hart helps the staff understand that their job is "embracing everybody that comes to us. Whether it's culturally diverse or religiously diverse, we embrace everybody and we're here to accept." Another described the shift from emphasizing the Catholic denomination to being more ecumenical: "We've become more of a community school, welcoming all beliefs." In addition to the multicultural symbols and images throughout the school, Ms. Hart prompted the creation of an anti-racism task force that, as a research participant described, "is really the real deal, not nicey nice." The task force recruited people to serve on a team to pursue anti-racism in the school community over the course of the next three years. In short, the research participants in these three schools clearly understood the practiced mission of these schools as articulated by the school principals.

In addition to being grounded in the articulation of the school principal, the mission in these schools was explicitly tied to the religious identity of the school. For instance, in MS, one of the educators explained the mission to serve students in the area as central to the school's Catholic identity: "We're not a Catholic school because we have

mass or have crucifixes in the classrooms. Our catholicity is in our outreach to children who are in need and who are looking for a safe place to receive an education." While a majority of the students in each of these schools were non-Catholic, the prayer, ritual, and symbolism that punctuated the daily schedule and culture of the school seemed to align with the espoused mission. The religious imagery in icons and symbols in each school were culturally relevant to reflect the students and families within the school community. Hallways in JA were marked by Black religious symbols, while those in GPS celebrated Latino religious imagery, and MS had religious icons representing diverse dimensions of race ethnicity and nationality throughout the school. Interviews with educators frequently expressed the commitment to foster an inclusive and caring environment as an outgrowth of the religious identity of the school.

Finally, principals and other research participants consistently referenced this understanding of mission as a feature distinguishing their school from other Catholic schools. In other words, the educators in JA, GPS, and MS not only considered the school's inclusion of traditionally marginalized students as grounded in their religious identity, but they also understood this as setting them apart from other schools with the same religious affiliation. As mentioned in the overview, all of these schools were different from traditional notions of Catholic elementary schools, either as consolidated (MS and JA) or physically connected to but fiscally independent from a parish (GPS). In sum, these data suggest that JA, GPS, and MS have survived to serve traditionally marginalized students while other Catholic schools have not because they embraced this as a core responsibility, and defined this as part of their mission.

Ecology of community

A second prong of Starratt's (2003) conceptual framework is cultivating community. Starratt argues that school leaders must create "an ecology of community that promotes the richest form of individual human life within the richest form of community life" (p. 81). This ecological approach to community sees interdependency as fundamental. Starratt explains that connections to other humans "shape us, feed our sense of who we are. We do not enter into relationships as fully formed individuals. Rather, our relationships continuously nourish and form us" (p. 83). Responsibility engulfs ethics of critique, justice, and care. School leaders cultivate a responsible community by nurturing "the foundational qualities of autonomy, connectedness, and transcendence" (p. 146). The data from these schools suggest that efforts to include

traditionally marginalized students reflect an ecological approach to community.

Staying connected. Ms. Green, principal of JA captured the centrality of relationships in her school: "You have to stay connected. The foundation of this school is to stay connected." One way these connections reflected an ecological approach was the multifarious manners in which they occurred. For instance, site visits and interviews to JA show Ms. Green taking time daily to talk with faculty about differentiating instruction for teaching and about connecting with caregivers in proactive, positive manners. The principals in GPS and MA described their ongoing efforts to reduce the language barriers to families. Ms. Green and Sr. Elaine, especially, spend time each day building relationships with potential donors, foundation officers, and businesspeople to explore how to bring more resources to their schools. Building relationships with faculty, families, and community was a central practice in each of these three school leaders' days.

The private nature of the school and the centrality of the mission contributed to an ecological approach to community in JA, GPS, and MA. Private schools in general depend on attracting support from families to enroll their students, and these private schools in particular (because they were not tuition based but instead drew significant funding from other sources) relied on widening this support to the broader community. This contributed to the principal, and by extension the school community, seeking to foster relationships with many different constituents in the community. The mission provided the starting point for building these relationships. As a teacher in GPS explained, GPS draws families with whom their mission resonates: "We seem to attract people who have the same value system. They may have different religious backgrounds, but spirituality, a sense of strong values, a sense of… respect for life in general is very important in this particular school." She continued by explaining, "The primary person for all of us in this… is the child, the student, the person for whom we are all looking to give the greatest benefit and the strongest foundation." The connections, therefore, are forged within a tightly defined context.

The evidence in this study suggests that educators in GPS, JA, and MS foster community not just by attracting like-minded families, but also through responding to the needs that families present. For instance, on one site visit to GPS, Sr. Elaine spent hours working with a mother to navigate the linguistic barriers of the English-only legal system in the area. Interviews and site visits at JA showed Ms. Green extensively interviewing every family enrolling their children. She also mandates that teachers engage in weekly communication with all caregivers focused on student

growth and achievement. This served as a pragmatic strategy for breaking down communication barriers across race ethnicity, with most of the JA educators White and all the families Black. In MS, counseling support was provided to not only the students but also entire families, as the school recognized that for many families, this support was not available in other contexts.

Another dimension to the ecology of community that these school leaders foster is making connections with community resources external to the school. In MS, Ms. Hart used a local grant to fund a part-time volunteer coordinator position several years ago. Though the grant has subsequently expired, she continues to allocate funding to this position because this liaison effectively brings to classroom teachers numerous opportunities and resources from the community that they would otherwise miss. Many of these are directly targeted to reduce barriers, such as providing free math tutoring to better prepare middle school students for high school. Observations of Ms. Green and interviews with educators in JA showed that she was able to build the capacity of the school to serve struggling students by working with area agencies to bring into the school assessment services for students with learning disabilities and with local universities to attract learning coaches to help teachers differentiate instruction. All three schools were both able to conduct extensive renovations to the school and grounds over the past five years due directly to resources from grants and donations from local businesses. In short, the evidence shows that these principals fostered multiple, varied connections to constituencies (families, businesses) to enhance their service to traditionally marginalized students.

Cultivating meaning: In service of the mission

A third leg of Starratt's (2003) stool is cultivating meaning. Starratt explains that the role of school leaders is more than "administering meaning," which he describes as approaching teaching and learning from a strictly structural functional perspective (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). Starratt instead approaches the cultivation of meaning in a constructivist manner placed in a sociocultural context: "The making of meaning is bound up with the community's self-identification in relationship to the physical, social, and human worlds" (p. 35). Meaning contains both cultural and personal dimensions and is "attached to or embedded in events, circumstances, information, and symbols" (p. 28). The data from these schools suggest that efforts to include traditionally marginalized students were loosely understood as part of the broader leadership responsibilities of cultivating meaning in these school communities. Unlike the lenses of community and responsibility, this dimension

was less apparent, less interconnected, and less consistent. I will illustrate this by looking at how the school leaders cultivated meaning in each school community.

Cultivating meaning in GPS. While the sense of cultivating responsibility and community was in some ways more established in GPS than the other schools, the service delivery to traditionally marginalized students was infrequently described in terms of the larger context of cultivating meaning. Many research participants described the lack of clarity in curriculum and the isolation from colleagues in the school. An extended quote from the fourth grade teacher illustrates this:

> It would be beneficial to me to meet with others on a more regular basis, just to talk about curriculum. I mean our school doesn't have a curriculum – that's a problem for me! I don't know what I'm supposed to be teaching! We can just go by the book but I mean, this is my fourth year and I don't know what the third grade covers and I don't know what they are suppose to have covered. I could spend all this time on things they did the whole first half of third grade, so the consistency isn't there because I don't know what they did.

In addition to lacking an articulated curriculum and mechanisms for teachers to communicate about teaching and learning, GPS also lacked a comprehensive strategy for serving students who are English language learners and students with disabilities. Students who are ELL were in classrooms without formal bilingual supports, and although Sr. Elaine and her secretarial staff are bilingual, the other educators in the school are not. Service delivery to students with learning disabilities was also problematic. These students were bussed to another facility where they received support services for several hours each week. This was seen as making progress in providing services to students who might not otherwise have them, despite the fact that resources existed to bring support services into the school to help meet the needs of struggling students within the classroom. In sum, the principal in GPS did not focus the attention and efforts of the educators in the school community around the academic purposes of the school. Consequently, the lens of cultivating meaning was a clouded one.

Cultivating meaning in MS. In MS the service delivery to traditionally marginalized students was described in terms of the larger context of cultivating meaning, but done inconsistently. On one hand, the principal emphasized that she works hard to enroll children who may have had academic or behavioral struggles in other schools: "We

believe that children do need a second chance." She has built the capacity to better serve the diversity of students coming to the school. Some steps she has taken include hiring a full time social worker, delegating to the academic dean the responsibility for monitoring service delivery plans for students, contracting with a local agency to provide special education services within the school, and working with local public schools to gain access to other services for students with disabilities. The school community is more responsive to children and families who are English language learners, particularly Spanish speaking, with a bilingual resource specialist and bilingual secretary. In-house professional development emphasizes differentiation of instruction and culturally relevant teaching. Thus, in many ways Ms. Hart shows that she is focusing the MS community on teaching and learning that cultivates meaning for traditionally marginalized students.

On the other hand, teachers expressed frustration at the lack of collaborative strategies to help students who are struggling. One teacher described this in a manner reflective of many participants:

> I think we'd be a lot more successful if we take the time to sit down and meet in support teams for students… whose needs are the greatest, and try to figure it out. If we're not going to turn them away and we can't just send them to special ed then we need to communicate and work together, to collaborate.

In addition to the lack of collaboration, Ms. Hart described a lack of resources as occasionally driving her to ask a child to leave the school:

> The reason a child is asked to leave our school is because we don't have the resources to serve them- and that might be because of behavioral or academic issues. But we work as closely as we can with the child and the family, for as long as possible, and as long as there's progress being made, we keep at it. We will ask a child to leave if they're a danger to themselves or others or if we can't meet their needs.

A counselor at MS explained a perspective that most participants echoed on why MS could not serve all students: "It's all about resources really. We just don't have the specialty people, the therapists… we don't have speech and occupational therapy… It's available to [students with disabilities] but not here, that's what it comes down to." Hence, on one hand Ms. Hart's leadership grew the capacity of the MS school community to cultivate meaning for traditionally marginalized students, while on the other hand, citing a lack of resources and willingness to collaborate, the school struggled to consistently pursue this for all students.

Cultivating meaning in JA. In both GPS and MS the leaders did not consistently frame the service of traditionally marginalized students as part of their larger goal to cultivate meaning. By contrast, in JA, the principal Ms. Green consistently emphasized the connection between reducing barriers to students and raising academic achievement. Many research participants described this. For instance, Ms. Wells, her secretary, described, "Whatever the child needs to become a full functioning student, and any other needs that's stopping them from focusing on academics, [Ms. Green] sees to it that those needs are met." Another participant, a teacher, described how clear, frequent communication with colleagues about student performance is "ingrained in expectations" in JA, leading to collaboration amongst teachers, support staff (i.e. counselors and Title I teachers), and the principal. Such collaboration is focused on helping each student toward the school mission, which this particular teacher described as "To make sure that every student succeeds to the best of their ability."

This emphasis on sharing the responsibility to foster student success was most prominent in JA. As one teacher explained, there were no exceptions here: "We want to be able to work with any child, no matter how low their educational abilities might be. We want to be able to serve everyone – anyone and everyone – any child." Ms. Green was consistently ascribed with cultivating a culture emphasizing both acceptance and strong expectations that supported this. Her attitude of acceptance was unreserved: "We pretty much accept everybody." When pushed on the matter about students who might have to be let go because the school lacked the resources to serve them, her tone showed exasperation: "There's no place to let a child go to!" This attitude of acceptance was coupled with an insistence that all the teachers focus on student learning, described earlier. Simply put, the principal in JA was unique in her apparent knack for weaving the cultivation of meaning seamlessly with the cultivation of community and responsibility in her school community.

Discussion and conclusions

These data suggest that Starratt's (2003) model can serve as a useful framework in illustrating strengths and limitations in a school leader's pursuit of the social justice goal of better serving traditionally marginalized students. Starratt's model situates these three dimensions of his conceptual framework together as "organically related to each other

and mutually interdependent" (p. 64). My analyses suggest that these three dimensions of responsibility, meaning, and community are, to a degree, mutually reinforcing. The sense of mission to serve students on the margins was articulated as both a responsibility of the school and a core dimension of the school community. Paradoxically, the private, religious nature of these schools did not encourage exclusion, but rather facilitated a philosophy conducive to inclusivity. A research participant from MS put this succinctly, "We recognize that we have very different children from different religions, different ethnic backgrounds, different economic backgrounds, and that that is who we are and what we want to celebrate." Site-based management conferred on Ms. Green, Sr. Elaine, and Ms. Hart high degrees of independence, and the exclusive reliance on generating support from families and the community forced them to capture their mission in compelling, appealing terms. Additionally, these notions were embraced, albeit to varying degrees, by the faculty and support staff in these schools. Through recruiting and hiring new staff, targeting professional development opportunities, and attaining resources from the broader community, these principals established communities of practice more welcoming of traditionally marginalized students.

The data also show that the notions of responsibility, meaning, and community are inconsistently understood across various dimensions of marginalization. For instance, in GPS Sr. Elaine significantly reduced barriers of racism while largely ignoring barriers of poverty and disability. In JA, these barriers of poverty and disability were minimized, yet issues of racism and White privilege were totally ignored. Internal inconsistencies were evident in the leadership practices of each principal, yet were predominantly unrecognized, and inhibited the inclusivity of traditionally marginalized students. The multicase nature of this study illustrated that these inconsistencies appeared in schools with similar contexts, showing that the availability of resources was less a determining factor than different understandings of responsibility, meaning, and community. In addition, notions of responsibility, community, and meaning are not static, but variable and changing. These inconsistencies suggest that school leaders need to critically reflect upon their pursuits of social justice goals. Scanlan (2006) argues that such problematizing "can help school leaders avoid social justice practices that are stultified or contradictory" (p. 8). Starratt's (2003) framework would be strengthened by more directly accounting for these dynamics.

Further complicating the role of the school leaders as cultivating responsibility, community, and meaning was the political reality: in order to keep their schools in operation, these three principals needed to literally grow money and enrollment. This points to the underlying context of resource scarcities in which school leaders' practices are always situated. These contextual features are not separable from cultivating responsibility, community, and meaning – but rather enmeshed with them. For instance, Catholic elementary schools serving traditionally marginalized students are pushed and pulled to engage parents and guardians, or "caregivers" (Scanlan, forthcoming). Their religious mission pulls them toward such outreach, as Catholic schools explicitly recognize these caregivers as the primary educators of children (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2005). At the same time, a dependency on attracting and retaining students to the school pushes them to this engagement. Each leader in this study demonstrated a particular facility in attracting resources to her school, both in terms of fiscal donations and families to enroll their students, with a keen awareness of this political reality.

Adept leadership is needed for any school to effectively serve all students, especially when a majority of students face barriers such as poverty, racism, or language. Such commitment and investment emerges from theories of leadership that are both comprehensive of the multifarious demands of administration and targeted to reduce injustice in our schools (Marshall & Oliva, 2006; Murphy, 2002a, 2002b; Riehl, 2000). This study implies that as practicing school and district leaders juggle the competing claims on their time and attention by multiple administrative responsibilities, they will be well served by employing Starratt's (2003) model as a tool to assist this calculus. Specifically, school leaders benefit from (a) articulating the responsibility to serve all students in moral, ethical language; (b) strengthening the ecology of community that benefits the common good; and (c) connecting this sense of responsibility and community directly to the pursuit of student learning outcomes and achievement gains. By critically reflecting on cultivating responsibility, meaning, and community, educational leaders will be more intentional and transparent about the values they espouse, the educational goals they hold, and the sociality they seek in their educational settings.

[1] To refer to the race and ethnicity of students and research participants in this article, I use the terms Latino, Black, and White. These terms are purposefully chosen. I use Latino to refer to students of Hispanic origin as a term that embraces the plurality of these cultures while attempting to avoid the oppressive connotations of other labels (Hernandez, 2005). I use the term black because African American was sometimes not accurate, as some individuals identified as African, others as having Caribbean ancestry, and others as Black. The label Black was the most inclusive term. Finally, I use the term White to refer to individuals who are Caucasian in an effort to emphasize the role that Whiteness (explored and unexplored) plays in this research (Alcoff, 1998; Chubbuck, 2004; McIntosh, n.d.).

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