

Understandings of White Saviorism in Future Development Practitioners (Preliminary Results)

Emma Stine

Dr. Amy Javernick-Will & Dr. Tiera Tanksley

University of Colorado Boulder





Theory Behind White Saviorism

Methods & Results

So What



Take a minute to

- 1) Picture what White Saviorist looks like
- 2) Define the specific actions, contexts or beliefs of White Saviorism



Description of White Saviorism

Reacting to the 2012 Kony campaign, Teju Cole tweeted the following about white saviorism

- From Sachs to Kristof to Invisible Children to TED, the fastest growing industry in the US is the White Savior Industrial Complex.
- The white savior supports brutal policies in the morning, founds charities in the afternoon, and receives awards in the evening.
- The banality of evil transmutes into the banality of sentimentality. The world is nothing but a problem to be solved by enthusiasm.
- This world exists simply to satisfy the needs--including, importantly, the sentimental needs--of white people and Oprah.
- The White Savior Industrial Complex is not about justice. It is about having a big emotional experience that validates privilege.
- Feverish worry over that awful African warlord. But close to 1.5 million Iraqis died from an American war of choice. Worry about that.
- I deeply respect American sentimentality, the way one respects a wounded hippo. You must keep an eye on it, for you know it is deadly.

Defined oppressive norms and behaviors

Being hypocritical about activism and self defining what fighting for equality is (White Determining of justice) (Lipsitz, 2018)

Believing you have supreme and valuable talent, effort, and achievement because you are from a high income community (Meritocracy) (Kennedy, 1995)

Feeling and pursuing emotional satisfaction from activist-esque behavior, despite the intent or impact of your actions (emotional disinvestment) (Mills, 2007)

Cherry picking what activism to take part in, and working against social justice if that is in your personal favor (interest convergence) (Bell, 1980)

Description of White Saviorism

Reacting to the 2012 Kony campaign, Teju Cole tweeted the following about white saviorism

- From Sachs to Kristof to Invisible Children to TED, the fastest growing industry in the US is the White Savior Industrial Complex.
- The white savior supports brutal policies in the morning, founds charities in the afternoon, and receives awards in the evening.
- The banality of evil transmutes into the banality of sentimentality. The world is nothing but a problem to be solved by enthusiasm.
- This world exists simply to satisfy the needs--including, importantly, the sentimental needs--of white people and Oprah.
- The White Savior Industrial Complex is not about justice. It is about having a big emotional experience that validates privilege.
- Feverish worry over that awful African warlord. But close to 1.5 million Iraqis died from an American war of choice. Worry about that.
- I deeply respect American sentimentality, the way one respects a wounded hippo. You must keep an eye on it, for you know it is deadly.

Defined oppressive norms and behaviors

The dominant social group is pursuing **emotional self satisfaction** and **promoting meritocracy** while partaking in actions that **they define as social activism** and that **ignore the systems** promoting their own supremacy

We collected common understandings of White Saviorism

We ask 40 students from 7 US Humanitarian Engineering Graduate Programs

- How do you identify white saviorism?
- How do you combat white saviorism?

Segments were then coded for “hinges” or what aspects, contexts, or beliefs made development work white saviorist or not

The hinges (aspects, contexts, or beliefs) that made a development project White Saviorism

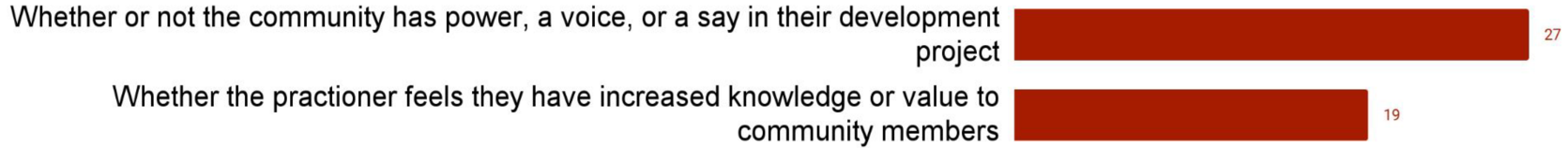
Whether or not the community has power, a voice, or a say in their development project

27

“How do I combat (saviorism)? (...) It's really complicated, but I think it comes down to you have to work with on the ground partners(...) You want to engage with stakeholders, and you need to make sure you're not managing them and forcing them into certain procedures and practices. (...), you allow people autonomy and agency to enact their own solutions”

the number of students that brought up a particular hinge (40 total)

The hinges (aspects, contexts, or beliefs) that made a development project White Saviorism

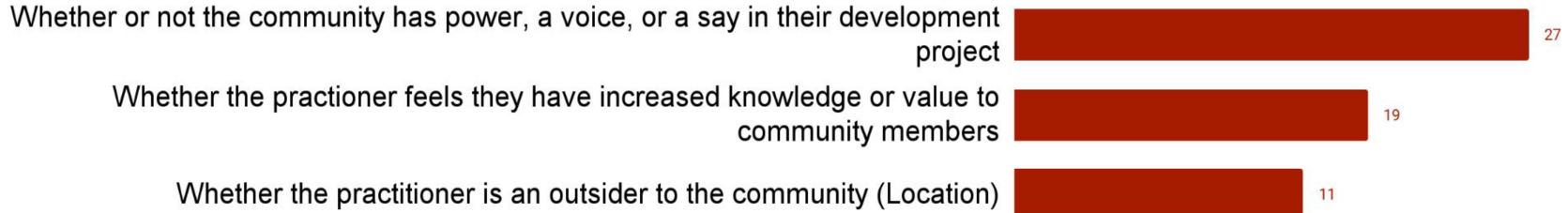


“you think that, you know best no matter what or you have knowledge that other people in other countries don't have for some reason, even though, like in our profession, there's engineers in every country”

the number of students that brought up a particular hinge (40 total)

x

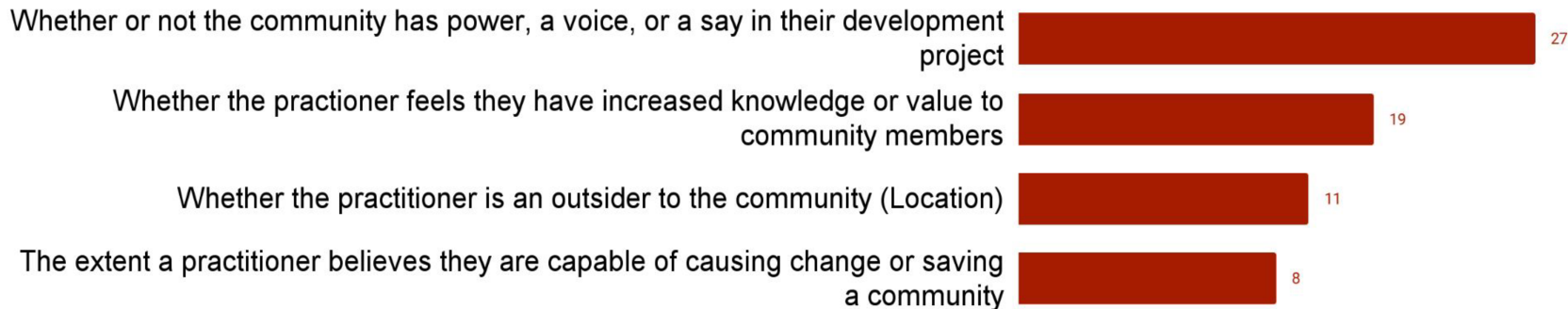
The hinges (aspects, contexts, or beliefs) that made a development project White Saviorism



“And I know (there are issues) all around you, (I could) help people in the U.S. (however) I do love living abroad and the different cultures and learning about different aspects. And just like so many of my friends are from different cultures and I've just gotten to learn so much from them”

the number of students that brought up a particular hinge (40 total)

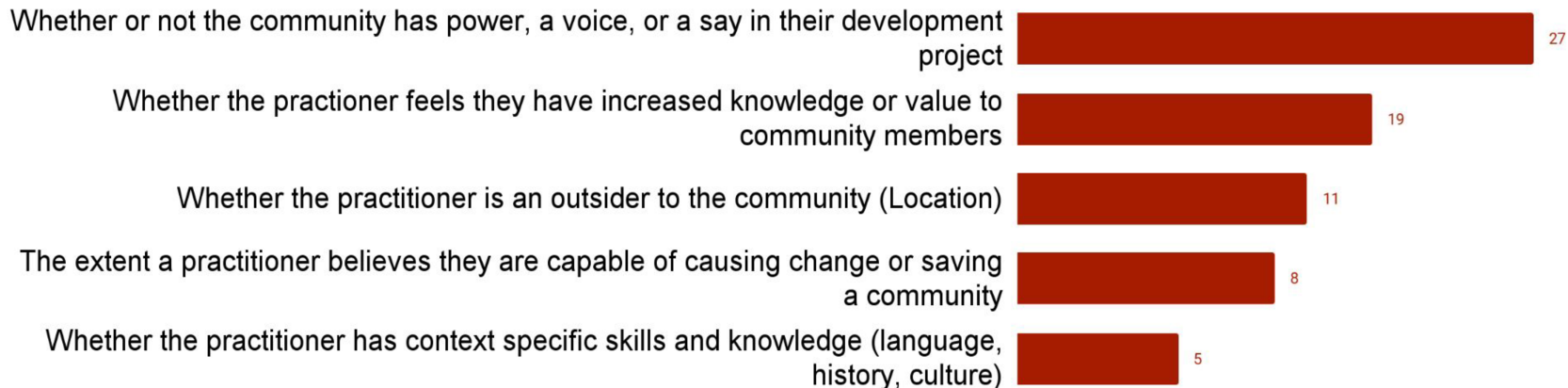
The hinges (aspects, contexts, or beliefs) that made a development project White Saviorism



“We're like, this community needs me, a young undergrad student to come and help them and I'm going to have like a really big impact. (...) Yeah, I guess it kind of comes down to that thinking that like this community needs you and like that they're going to be like, So grateful for you”

the number of students that brought up a particular hinge (40 total)

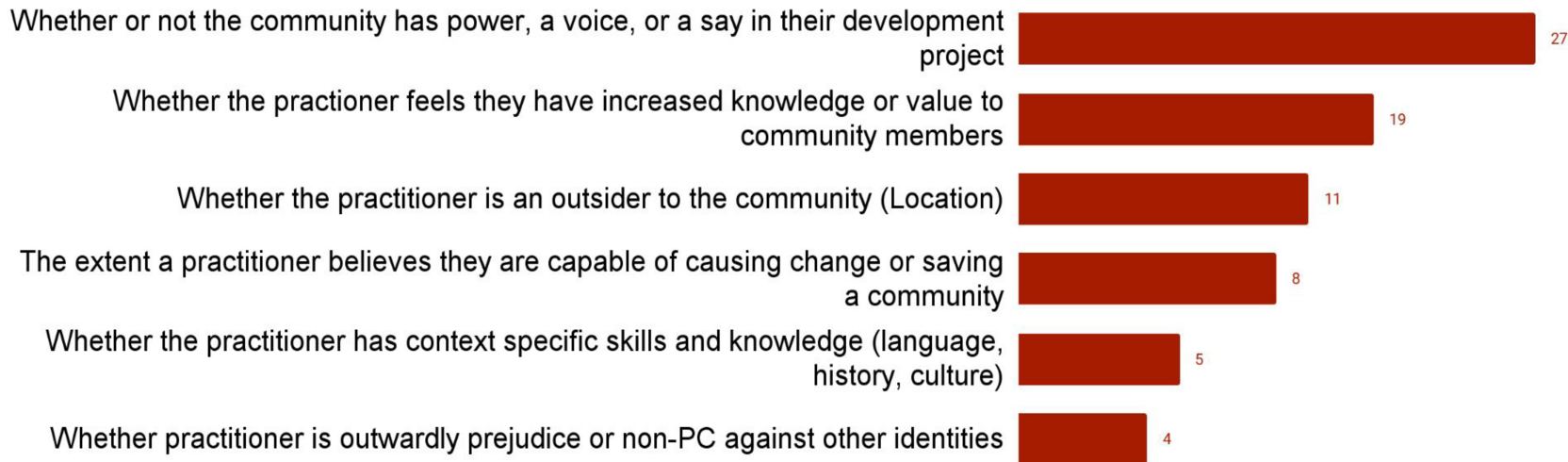
The hinges (aspects, contexts, or beliefs) that made a development project White Saviorism



“I think like, let's say I go to El Salvador and I want to connect with that community. If I can't speak Spanish, and I can't connect, you're basically a white savior.”

the number of students that brought up a particular hinge (40 total)

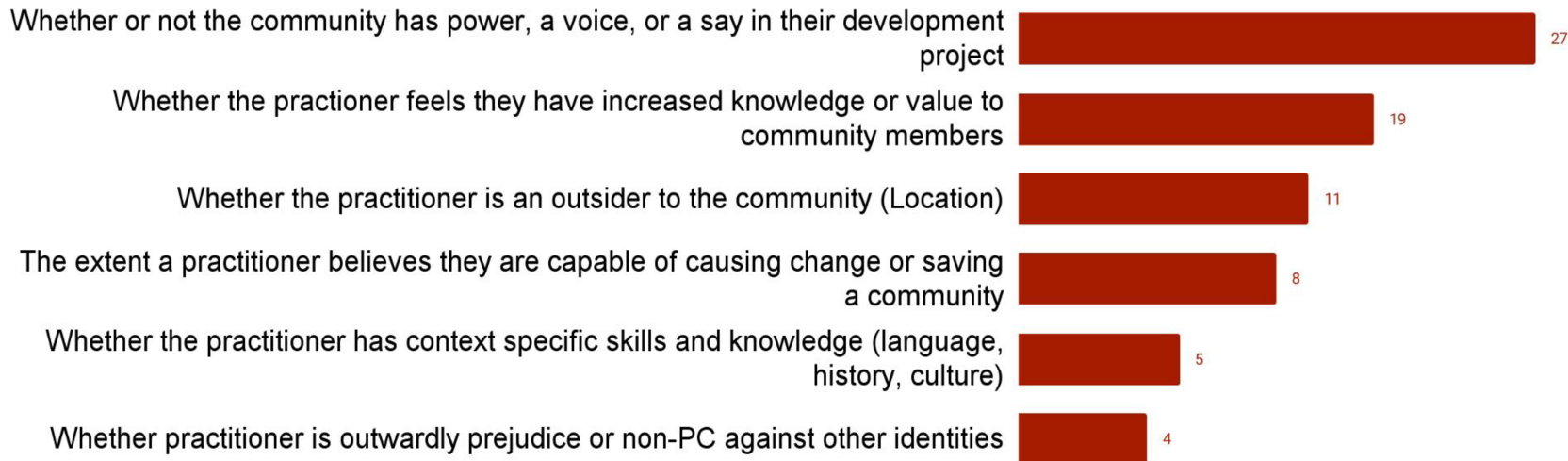
The hinges (aspects, contexts, or beliefs) that made a development project White Saviorism



“ I think even among volunteers, (I saw) that some volunteers saw people (community members) as like less humans than themselves, and you could tell just kind of like by the language that they used when they talked about their communities or their counterparts.”

the number of students that brought up a particular hinge (40 total)

The hinges (aspects, contexts, or beliefs) that made a development project White Saviorism



Other themes that came up

Whether the practitioner is...

- Working for emotional satisfaction (3)
- Posting Poverty Porn (instagram posts of charity work) (3)
- Completing successful or failed projects (3)
- Acknowledging that the system or world is messed up (1)

Comparing HE Students “hinges” and previous discussed description

1. Whether or not the community has power, a voice, or a say in their development project
2. Whether the practitioner feels they have increased knowledge or value to community members
3. Whether the practitioner is an outsider to the community (Location)
4. The extent a practitioner believes they are capable of causing change or saving a community
5. Whether the practitioner has context specific skills and knowledge (language, history, culture)
6. Whether practitioner is outwardly prejudice or non-PC against other identities

The dominant social group is pursuing **emotional self satisfaction** and **promoting meritocracy** while partaking in actions that **they define as social activism** and that **ignore the systems** promoting their own supremacy

Comparing HE Students “hinges” and previous discussed description

Student Descriptions

Focused on their actions towards marginalized groups instead of their actions towards systems of oppression

This is a problem because...

White supremacy thrives on telling us that racism, or oppression rests on how dominant individuals interact with oppressed individuals. Instead of the systems activity privileging one group over another (Tatum, 1997)

The dominant social group is pursuing **emotional self satisfaction** and **promoting meritocracy** while partaking in actions that **they define as social activism** and that **ignore the systems** promoting their own supremacy

Why can we picture White Saviorism but struggle to accurately define it?

- When oppression is not clearly written in law, marginalized communities and activists have to illustrate their lived experiences of oppression through media, art, poetry, songs, or stories **(proof or receipts that some norm, policy or structure of the world is unjust)**
 - The “white savior” has been continuously developed and refined using poetry, film and other forms of art **(aiding dominant communities in picturing it)**
- Theory created by marginalized groups must then also be utilized to define oppression actions, thoughts and contexts **(humans are very bad at defining oppression that they are not recipients of)**
- Dominant groups must be careful about defining an oppressive actions even if they are able to recognize it



Final Takeaway of Research

- Dominant groups must be careful about defining an oppressive actions even if they are able to recognize it



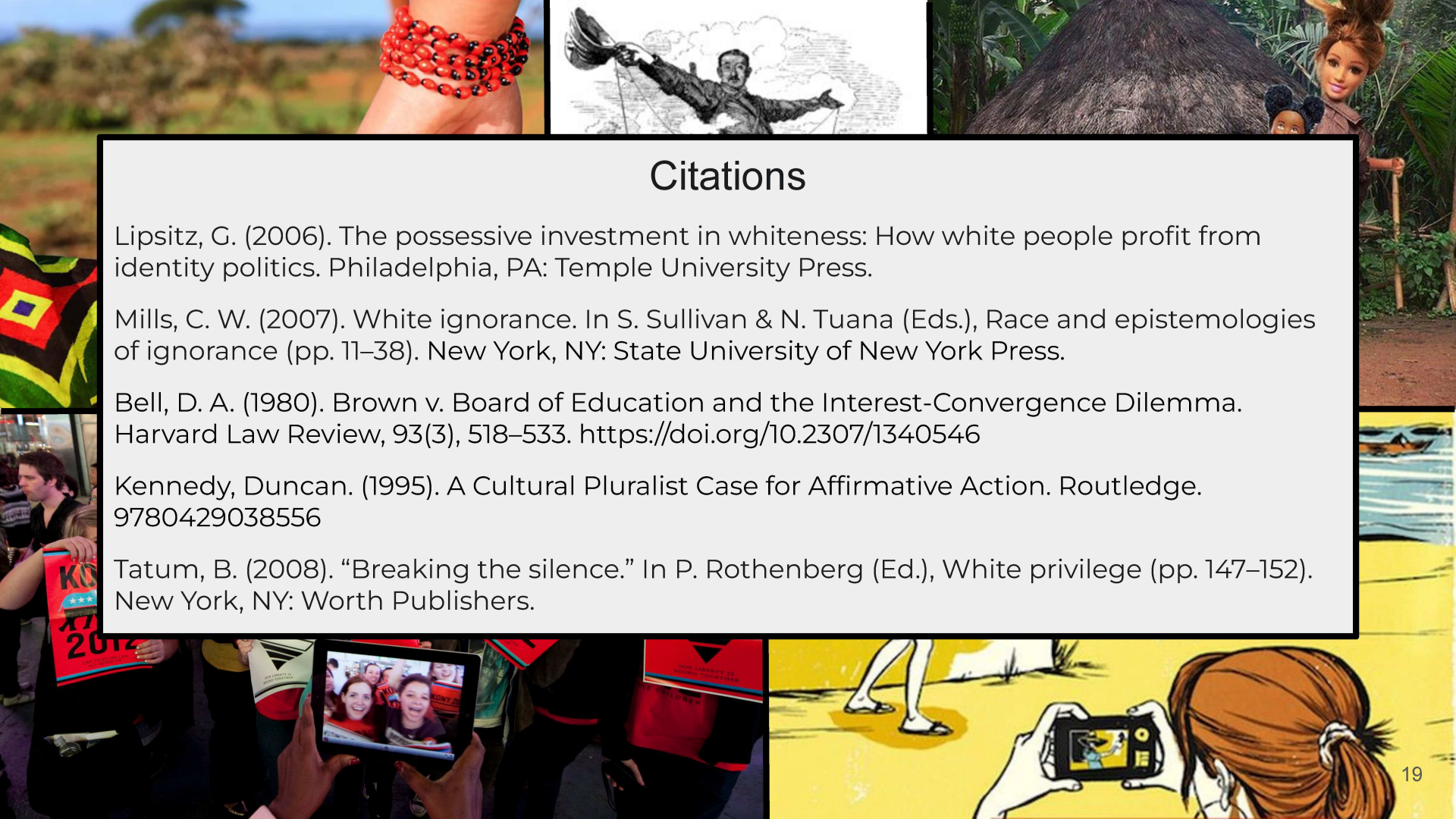
1) What Questions Do You Have?



Emma Stine, emma.stine@colorado.edu
Dr. Amy Javernick-Will & Dr. Tiera Tanksley
University of Colorado Boulder



This work is supported by the National Science Foundation
Under grant no. 2140601



Citations

Lipsitz, G. (2006). *The possessive investment in whiteness: How white people profit from identity politics*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

Mills, C. W. (2007). White ignorance. In S. Sullivan & N. Tuana (Eds.), *Race and epistemologies of ignorance* (pp. 11–38). New York, NY: State University of New York Press.

Bell, D. A. (1980). *Brown v. Board of Education and the Interest-Convergence Dilemma*. *Harvard Law Review*, 93(3), 518–533. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1340546>

Kennedy, Duncan. (1995). *A Cultural Pluralist Case for Affirmative Action*. Routledge. 9780429038556

Tatum, B. (2008). “Breaking the silence.” In P. Rothenberg (Ed.), *White privilege* (pp. 147–152). New York, NY: Worth Publishers.