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Leadership: the Act of Making Way for Others

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ABSTRACT
Conservation in the United States (USA) is an elite field of mostly white, upper-middle-class women. While there have been efforts over the decades to diversify the field, they have not been successful in significantly changing the demographics. In January 2020, the authors embarked on addressing one aspect of diversification: shifting the culture from one of exclusion to one that listens to and takes direction from those who are excluded. We planned a workshop we thought was designed to include the excluded. We found it was still steeped in practices that maintain the dominant culture. This paper outlines how the experience of the global pandemic, the move from an in-person to an online workshop, and the impact of the social justice uprising resulting from George Floyd's murder fundamentally changed how we designed and led this workshop. Our growth was shaped significantly by developing an understanding of White Supremacy Culture (WSC), a system where perfectionism, defensiveness, paternalism, either/or thinking, individualism, and objectivity help maintain the *status quo*. This new perspective informed the creation of a series of sessions where we acknowledged, examined, and deconstructed power and privilege. We learned that if we want to achieve inclusion, we must understand the current culture of exclusion and the ways it prevents the work of building inclusive spaces. Though WSC as defined here is specific to the USA, cultures of exclusion exist worldwide. Lessons learned from trying to dismantle WSC in US conservation can be applied more broadly to create equitable professional and social communities around the world.

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Introduction: including the excluded by asking for direction

Currently, the field of conservation in the United States (USA) is fairly homogeneous and does not reflect the makeup of US society as a whole. It is predominantly white, university educated, able-bodied, upper-middle-class, and female (AIC 2019; AIC Equity and Inclusion Committee 2021; AIC Membership Designation Committee 2018). Many inside and outside of the field recognize this as something that needs to change. US institutions and funding bodies have been contributing resources to diversification efforts for more than a decade (University of Delaware n.d.). Still, the racial demographic of the American Institute for Conservation (AIC) is 1% Black, 4% Asian, 2% Latino and 1% Native American, while the US as a whole is 13% Black, 6% Asian, 19% Latino, and 1% Native American (AIC Membership Designation Committee 2018; United States Census Bureau n.d.).

In autumn 2019, the authors, knowing AIC had not yet achieved the diversity it sought, set out to explore another avenue to understanding how to diversify the field. They posited that it is only people who are excluded who really know what needs to change in order to make them welcome, integral, equal partners. To implement the changes identified by the excluded, the authors hypothesized current leaders would need to let go of power and control. By giving the excluded the power of leadership and subsequently following their lead, the field of conservation, and likely many other exclusive fields, could become truly equitable and inclusive. Power can be defined as 'the capacity or ability to direct or influence the behavior of others,' but perhaps the power to create change can actually be found in letting go of power (Oxford English Dictionary n.d.).

Characteristics of White Supremacy Culture

One common framework for maintaining power in the US is White Supremacy Culture (WSC) (Okun n.d.). This framework was defined by Tema Okun and inspired by her work with Kenneth Jones. It lists fifteen attitudes and behaviors of WSC (Figure 1), explains how they manifest, and provides antidotes to these ways of thinking and acting. It exposes how our organizational cultures are socially constructed to reflect White Supremacist norms that impose rigid standards, no matter our race, that are invisible to us. It demonstrates how these rigid standards are effective in maintaining power and keeping out anyone who tries to create change.

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Figure 1. Fifteen attitudes and behaviors of White Supremacy Culture, as defined by Tema Okun, 28–34, https://resourcegeneration.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/2016-dRworks-workbook.pdf.

We were born and raised in the US. We know, without a doubt, that WSC is dominant in our home country. We cannot speak with the same confidence about whether or not this white European construct exists in other countries. The work of Ngcobo (2018), the Australian Council for the Arts (2020), Corbet (2021) and Francis (2021) indicate there are challenges with white dominance in museums and culture in the UK, Australia, France, and South Africa. There are other dominant and non-dominant cultures throughout the world. An examination of WSC and how it helps certain people in the US remain dominant may help others examine dominance in their own countries, organizations, and families and consider whether that dominance needs to be deconstructed.

One way to consider these characteristics is to divide them into three categories:

- Perspective – what shapes the individual perspectives we bring to a group
- Process – what impacts how willing and effective we are when working in a group
- Goals – what shapes the goals we have for our work.

These groupings are fluid and of our own creation. They are one way to consider how power is affected by WSC characteristics.

Perspective

Our individual perspectives are shaped by our culture and beliefs and provide a foundation that shapes how we interact when we work with others. Okun outlines how either/or thinking, objectivity, defensiveness, and the right to comfort can be individual values and approaches to thinking that help one maintain the dominant status quo. If we embrace *either/or thinking*, we set up a binary with only two options: good or bad, right or wrong, true or false. With this reality we can and must simplify complex ideas, allowing us to define the binary. Then we can and must choose a side. In this binary world, we see ourselves as *objective*. If there is right and wrong there is no need for emotion or room for non-linear thinking, thus any expressed emotions are inappropriate and unprofessional. Therefore, we have a *right to emotional and psychological comfort*. If we are uncomfortable, either/or thinking and objectiveness have probably been abandoned. The different ideas that come from this abandonment bring into question the binary and an individual's chosen side. A *defensive* response is then appropriate. Our identities as objective, neutral thinkers have been questioned.

Process

Dominance is maintained in WSC through the validation of certain behaviors and approaches to the process of working together. These behaviors emphasize individual power and authority over group effort and collaboration. They also emphasize the need for speed and perfection at the same time. Power is seen as a limited commodity that should be maintained and retained at all costs. To obtain power you demonstrate your ability as an *individual*. What the team can do is not of concern. It is about what you can do. Once power is obtained you do all you can to *hoard* that power, which is in limited supply. One way of doing this is to see yourself as *the only one* who can complete a task. In completing the task on your own, you get the recognition which feeds the sense of individualism and power hoarding. A behavior that complements this approach to power is *paternalism*, where those in power see themselves as the ones who know best and must be relied on to make decisions for others. Bringing a *fear of open conflict*, a *constant sense of urgency*, and a need for *perfection* to this power structure helps maintain the status quo. *Fear of open conflict* prevents participants from

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voicing differing opinions, prioritizing those in power and emphasizing a culture of politeness that doesn't dig into the issues. The need to do things quickly leaves little time to question the process or the goal, to try new things, or reflect. A pervasive expectation of perfection leaves the power hoarder worried about failure and the subsequent loss of power, so it is best to avoid trying new things and continue with the way things have been done successfully in the past.

Goals

Finally, in WSC the goals are often defined in terms of product: its type and scale. There is *only one right way*. We must find that way and produce that product. That way must include *the written word*: if it's not written down, it's not trustworthy or authoritative. Measurable goals are crucial, so tangible products, things that can be counted, read, shared with others, are valued over intangible results, like relationship building and a democratic decision-making process. *Quantity is more important than quality*, so getting through the agenda is more important than quality discussion. Success is defined through *bigger and more progress*. Adding staff and projects, serving more people is success even if you sacrifice quality.

Where we started: some seeds of new thinking

We were not aware of the WSC framework in autumn 2019, when we embarked on creating an in-person conservation leadership workshop we thought was designed to include the excluded. We called the workshop *Advancing Equity and Inclusion in Conservation*. We recruited a group of early career professionals from populations that are currently under-represented[1] in the field of conservation. We simultaneously recruited a group of conservation professionals in positions of leadership who were already committed to diversifying the field. We planned to have the participants from both recruited groups work together to define what an inclusive conservation culture looks like, asking people from the excluded groups what it would take to make them feel included. We recognized that those in power do not always know best, and that in this case those currently left out are the ones with expert knowledge.

We eliminated most financial barriers to participation in the two-and-a-half-day event by covering all travel, accommodation and food expenses. Though we were not able to provide stipends, which was likely a barrier to participation for private practice conservators, our priority was to ensure participants spent none of their own money for the experience.

We recognized that honest sharing, the kind of sharing necessary to truly determine what is required to make the conservation culture inclusive, was going to be challenging in a group newly introduced to each other, where some were already in positions of authority over others and/or likely to be their future employers. We planned to speak to this in the opening minutes of our first gathering, which was a dinner with carefully orchestrated table groupings and discussion topics meant to help build community across authority lines. We crafted the remaining two days with groupings and discussion structure we thought would continue to enable honesty and engender trust.

Then the pandemic arrived and tossed everything in the air

All arrangements were in place, and then mid-March 2020, three weeks prior to the workshop, brought quarantine to most in the USA. Initially, we met virtually to start building community, but we were still focused on our in-person gathering. When it became clear an in-person gathering wouldn't happen soon, we scheduled our second virtual session for early June, only two weeks after the brutal murder of George Floyd and the fourth anniversary of the Pulse Nightclub Massacre (Hauser, Taylor, and Vigdor 2020; Alvarez and Pérez-Peña 2016). The world had exploded with a demand for social justice, equity, and inclusion, and the discourse had become more honest and forthright than the authors could ever remember. We threw out our original plan for this session and instead devoted it to listening to those who had been previously silenced and ignored. We chose to focus on the individual privilege and power each of us has, making space to be changed rather than orchestrating change for others. In this moment, we now recognize, we made a decision to let go of our past ways of operating to imagine another world and fight for it.

We started the session with two early career professionals, with Black and queer identities, sharing facts, thoughts and feelings about the fight for racial justice for Black lives and the power of intersectionality. Emotions had been running high around the country, with protests and riots. We recognized there was no way we could have productive and meaningful discussion if we ignored the life events that were consuming us, so we connected the work we were gathering to do, advancing equity and inclusion in conservation, with the current events in the world. The session was devoted to a discussion about the protests and how participants felt impacted by it. We also added opening and closing meditation to ground us in the moment, acknowledge the anxiety of the present, and give ourselves permission to focus on being together for the two hours we had. As leaders, we

shared our feelings, an uncommon practice in US professional settings. In the end, the connection to life outside of work, a conscious effort to be present, and a willingness to be vulnerable were fundamental changes that set the tone for the workshop in the coming months.

A second, instructional portion of this June session was a presentation on recognizing the individual privilege we each have, given by Anisha, an early career conservator with a marginalized identity. She spoke about how each of us has privilege in different settings depending on various parts of our identity.[2] This privilege comes from simple and complex life circumstances, as well as what is given to us in a position of authority. Conservators in positions of authority (who were all white) were then asked to sit back and listen first, making space for early career conservators (mostly from marginalized groups) to share their realities. We acknowledged that we need to make space for those with less privilege in order to understand how we can use our privilege to create change. In pointing out where we all have or do not have privilege, and in giving leadership over to early career professionals, we started breaking down the power dynamics present, including authority and race.

In August of 2020, we were introduced to Okun's WSC framework. With this discovery, we found permission to follow our instincts, work differently, and try new approaches. We were ready to abandon our old ways of thinking and recreate the workshop so it instead focused on acknowledging, examining, and deconstructing power and privilege.

The pandemic continued, and our workshop evolved into a series of online sessions over a further nine months. As we grew in our understanding of WSC, we discovered how embedded we were in the ways of this dominant culture. Our original workshop plan was focused on the goals of the workshop leaders, rather than the goals the group could collectively define. We believed equity initiatives had been done in one way in the past, and we set out to find another, better way of creating change across the conservation field. We would find this other way in a weekend and have a draft product by the end of it. We were set to push people to a particular point, even if it meant setting aside time for discussion, individual growth, and building trusting relationships with new colleagues. The physical product to share with the conservation field was the goal. We even put a timeline on it: 'we will design a farther-reaching conservation leadership training workshop, to take place in spring of 2021.'

Our new, intentional approach

As we studied and processed the WSC framework, we started to see that one of the most effective ways to counteract WSC and achieve something more equitable and inclusive was to address power: how we understand it, how it shifts from individual to individual, and how we can shift it from the individual to the collective. When we came into the workshop, we were focused on the power of those in leadership positions, convinced that if conservators from marginalized backgrounds were able to influence those in power, we would see change in the field. We learned, however, that the issue is more complex. Power is not simply bestowed upon you when you achieve a position of leadership. Individuals gain and lose power in different contexts. Learning to recognize and address the power of both individuals and groups became crucial to our understanding of how to create effective and sustainable change.

Being cognizant of the damage uneven power dynamics and entrenched hierarchies can cause, we found ways to acknowledge and deconstruct these dynamics. Initially, there was the obvious power dynamic of student/faculty, early career/established conservator, future employee/future employer. We broke this down first by modeling shared leadership. Anisha, an early career conservator, and Joelle, an established conservator in a position of formal authority, shared the leadership of each session, often with Anisha taking more of the formal teaching role. Second, in the June 2020 session described above, early career professionals were highlighted in their roles as experts on living with race and gender identities that put them at increased risk of violence and murder. We acknowledged that those without these identities could never understand what it feels like to be in this position. As non-experts, on the outside, it is our job to listen, trust and believe what we hear. In the post-workshop survey, early career conservators were often cited as bringing some of the most innovative thinking, having the most courage to speak up, and leading the way to building a place where honesty and vulnerability were expected and encouraged. We feel certain that this outcome was the direct result of deconstructing the assumption that only with age and status come power and knowledge.

Shifting away from teachers and learners and toward a community of equal participants meant that in our group power could no longer be gained or maintained by standing out. Power was transferred from the individual leader to the group. We became facilitators rather than leaders, and we transferred power to the group by continually asking our members what they needed and wanted. The answers came in response to a formal survey, in comments during workshop sessions, and in a variety of email communications between group members sharing current events in their local, professional, and world-wide communities that they wanted to discuss with each other. We shaped our subsequent sessions

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to respond to the identified needs. As workshop facilitators, we recognized we still held power. We used it to make space for discussion, reflection, and imagination, recognizing that these experiences change people, and it is internal, individual change that is necessary for long-lasting institutional and systemic change.

At the same time, we acknowledged that individual power does exist. It comes with positions we are given and achieve but also from parts of our identities over which we have no control, like skin color, country of birth, and childhood economic status. In taking time to label the parts of our identities that lend us privilege and power, and other parts that make us targets of oppression, we hope to start breaking down the defensiveness around these difficult topics. The color of your skin is not something for which you can be blamed. If you are white in the USA you have power and privilege and you did not do anything specific to gain that power. You cannot change that. What you can change is whether or not you acknowledge that power and make a conscious choice to use it to make way for those without the power of your skin color.

As we worked to evolve our understanding and use of power, we also realized we needed to redefine success. We needed a new definition of success for our workshop but also for how conservators approach equity and inclusion work in general. We began to see that success is achieved by shifting away from what we as conservators assume marginalized groups will benefit from, and toward learning how to meet the goals defined by the groups themselves. In giving marginalized groups authority and power in this work, we can create a culture of belonging and inclusion. In the workshop, we started by listening to the people we say we want to work with, critically reviewing previous ways of doing, and adjusting our ways to reflect a new understanding of how power is gained and maintained. We worked towards this in many ways, including these three specific sessions.

(1) Sub-groups read articles and websites outlining societal demands from specific marginalized groups who are excluded because of their perceived disabilities, income status, gender, and race. They were asked to think critically about what these groups were asking for, what has prevented conservators from meeting these demands in the past, and what needs to change to enact these demands now.
(2) Participants returned to two diversity and inclusion projects, identified in their first virtual meeting as successful. Using their newly acquired knowledge regarding how marginalized groups define success, participants looked at how success had been defined several months earlier, and who was left out in the process of defining that success.
(3) Participants used these frames of mind to evaluate conservation job postings, descriptions and interview structures. They looked for ways these processes would be unwelcoming to members of these marginalized groups. This activity was one of the most frequently cited in the evaluations as impactful. As a result of this session, one participant made a small but significant change to the hiring process in their institutional department. They now send interview questions to applicants before their interviews. They realized they were not looking for employees who could think quickly and make on the spot decisions. They were looking for employees who would be careful and thoughtful. Having time to consider questions ahead of time was more likely to reveal this quality than asking applicants to respond to questions immediately.

In order to establish a safe space for all of these discussions, we collectively created a community agreement (Figure 2), a living document the entire group revisited and considered revising at the beginning of every session. Post-workshop anonymous feedback revealed that though this process succeeded in creating a safe space most of the time, there were things we did not recognize were affecting the dynamics of the group.

But there were things we left out

Although there were many honest and vulnerable conversations throughout the workshop, we never explicitly addressed an underlying fear of open conflict, especially around difficult topics, and in so doing created an environment with a fear of open conflict. As Okun explains in the WSC framework, an antidote to the fear of open conflict is distinguishing between the need to be polite and raising hard issues. Our sessions definitely had a sense of 'politeness' throughout. People shared learning moments where they were discovering mistakes they had made in the past. At the same time, they did not openly address hurtful comments made during our sessions. Some of these comments were shared privately with facilitators but raising them within the group, during an active discussion, did not seem safe or 'acceptable'. We failed to create channels by which hard, immediately present issues could be raised and discussed openly. This may be because we had a group with a wide variety of power relationships, and we were working hard to make sure everyone felt they were in a safe space where they could be vulnerable. But as Okun explains, discomfort is at the root of growth and learning. We lost opportunities for the group to experience

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Figure 2. *Advancing Equity and Inclusion in Conservation's* community agreement, co-created and regularly revisited by the entire group.

constructive conflict which could have led to incredible personal and professional growth. In future workshops, we will implement strategies that can embrace discomfort while maintaining a safe space.

Another thing we overlooked was discovered in the responses to the question: Would you recommend the workshop to others, why or why not? Eight of the nine survey respondents said yes, with the ninth indicating they were not sure because even though the workshop provided a great space they did not feel they could point to anything that was achieved. This highlighted for us that much of what we did provided a positive experience, but in removing tangible products from our workshop goals, and not adding measurable process goals we made it difficult for people to point to success. Next time, this should be dealt with up front by sharing that the goal of the workshop is to build relationships, discuss ideas, and make space for personal change, and perhaps have an intake and an exit reflection that helps participants evaluate whether they accomplished these three things.

Conclusion: including the excluded by making way

We started this project with a hypothesis that we diversify an exclusive field by asking the excluded what it will take to make them feel included. Growing our understanding of White Supremacy Culture has amplified this belief. Not only do we need the excluded to tell us how to include them, those of us in leadership roles have to make way for them. We have to stop setting the agenda, teaching people to do things our way, and welcoming people into our world. We need to let go of power. There are many others who can and should lead. We must let others take the good work we have done and shape it into something we never thought possible, and maybe never even imagined.

If given the opportunity to take on power, it should be done with caution. Casting others aside may make space for new ideas but it also sets up the opportunity to be equally exclusive. Recognizing that power can and should shift back and forth and be a shared tool is tricky. It may however be in the mastering of this trick that in the USA, and elsewhere, we get to a new conservation community that is shaped around equity rather than race, economic and educational status.

Notes

1. Depending on the context, there are many terms used to refer to people who are not part of the majority. Oppressed, under-represented, and marginalized are three of the most commonly used in the USA at the moment.
2. Participants identified areas of privilege and oppression from the following list: race, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, ability, age, education, immigrant status, religion, and language ability (i.e. native English speaker or not).

Backgrounds of the workshop leaders

Anisha Gupta is a cultural heritage conservator. After practicing conservation in museums and libraries, she decided to pursue doctoral studies to focus on making her own work more equitable and inclusive. As a PhD student in Preservation Studies at the University of Delaware, her research is

centered on confronting the legacies of colonialism in collections care and expanding our practice to include global caretaking traditions that value communities and sustainability. Anisha is also co-chair of the American Institute of Conservation's Equity and Inclusion Committee where she has spearheaded equity initiatives focused on systemic and cultural change.

Joelle D. J. Wickens is currently an Assistant Professor of preventive conservation in the Art Conservation Department, University of Delaware, USA, and the Associate Director of the Winterthur/University of Delaware Program in Art Conservation. Her current work in preventive conservation is dedicated to evolving the practice of the specialty to place social, economic, and environmental sustainability at its core. She is a daughter, sibling, wife, parent, educator, mentor, student, facilitator, preventive conservator … . Others identify her as disabled. She prefers phrases like, uses a wheelchair to navigate when outside of her home.

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