Building Bridges: A Student-Professor Dialogue About Spiritual Assumptions and Perspectives on Whiteness

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Abstract

One day in May during a recent year, a conversation began that launched several years of ongoing dialogue. A graduate student, Kyle, reached out to a graduate counseling professor, Andrea, to discuss some concerns and anxieties he felt in some of his class discussions. What began as a conversation about racial diversity in the counseling setting evolved into an exploration of different ways of looking at the sociocultural context of race in the United States, a topic discovered to have political and theological underpinnings. As a result of the dialogue, we realized that specific preconceived labels identifying political, theological, denominational, and other potential perspectives of origin were insufficient at best and divisive at worst. The process of dialoguing revealed that the way we both saw various issues was not dichotomous, and the use of the labels initially created obstacles to our understanding of one another. Our focus here is on our process of creating understanding, so we intentionally limit the use of labels and rely on descriptions of our perspectives. The resulting dialogue was so transformative that both
Kyle and Andrea, co-authors of this manuscript, wish to share our experiences with other students and educators.

**Introduction**

Hebrews 12:14: *Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy, without holiness no one will see the Lord.*

Division within our current socio-political environment within the U.S. is astronomically high, particularly along the lines of the two dominant political parties. How has this fracture affected those of us in a Christian context who focus on spiritual matters as they relate to emotional and mental health? To be a Christian means to be a follower of Jesus and the spiritual counterpart, the Holy Spirit, but we tend to conflate our status as Christians with any number of political issues. The second author and colleagues have measured that a strong sense of community is a robust predictor of psychological flourishing (Munoz et al., 2020). If our faith communities become divided along party lines, the psychological and mental health benefits provided to Christians who connect to their communities could be in jeopardy. With this in mind, we wish to share about our own trust-building process. Our purpose here is not to argue our perspectives but, rather, to share our process of building a relationship and healing any perceived fractures. References to the content of our conversations are to provide context about our starting points so that readers better understand the work required to build a bridge between them. As a White male and a White female, we recognize that our perspectives of race are bound by our own experiences of being White within a Western European perspective and, therefore, refer to such discussions primarily as being about “Whiteness.” We hope this article helps to expand the dialogue about and within various ethnic groups and maintain that those voices are crucial to fully building bridges. Kyle initiated the original conversation, so here we present his voice first. Sometimes we present our experiences individually and sometimes collectively, as reflected in the use of plural personal pronouns such as “we.” After sharing our initial reasons for the dialogue, we describe our assumptions about spirituality and Whiteness, our interactional experiences, and our takeaways from the process.
Setting the Stage: Initial Reasons for Starting the Dialogue

Kyle

Several years ago, I began to discern certain patterns within our educational and broader sociocultural systems that appeared to isolate specific groups, including the one to which I belong as a White male. Through various media outlets, I encountered descriptions of the “White male” experience and perspective that felt unfamiliar to me. The portrayals of the advantages presumably enjoyed by individuals like me seemed disconnected from my own lived reality. It became apparent that this dissonance was not unique to me; many young men of similar age and ethnic background shared in the feeling of being increasingly misunderstood, dismissed, and even rejected. White men’s internal dissonance remained largely unspoken, as there seemed to be no safe space to address these concerns openly. I, too, carried this emotional burden into my graduate counseling program, but it was only after I began to apply the tools of self-awareness, assertiveness, and communication skills from my program that I could articulate my experiences more effectively. While studying for my Counseling Diverse Populations class, my previous dissonance was revitalized, leading me down an unexpected path filled with anxiety, depression, and frustration.

My concern revolved around the polarization of experiences related to race and ethnicity in dominant U.S. society. Full exploration of this topic is beyond our scope here, but in summary, it appears that, in our pursuit of justice, we are limited by our subjective perceptions of what is “just.” When we realize that a change does not benefit us, we tend to view the source as a malevolent force and run the risk of devolving into a ‘hero’ versus ‘villain’ dichotomy, further dividing an already chaotic world (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2019). Whether the issues pertain to health, science, prevention, race, gender, or sexuality, polarized thinking tends to foster division and undermine our ability to find common ground (e.g., Berry & Sobieraj, 2014; Chua, 2018). As a society, we seem to have lost the capacity to adapt effectively and to prioritize common interests.
over self-interest. We are caught in a relentless cycle of dichotomizing one another based on our perceived differences, making it nearly impossible to develop lasting and mutually beneficial relationships that are integral to a positive human experience. The unfortunate reality is that this pattern of dichotomization appears to be gaining momentum, much like a destructive snowball, threatening to engulf everything and everyone in its path. As individuals trying to avoid being swept up by it, our only recourse may be to anchor ourselves to sustainable moral principles that value all human life.

Following George Floyd’s death in 2020, the escalation of politically polarized reactions to racial issues caused my own dissonance concerning the assumptions made about White males to resurface. During this period, I approached the administrator of my graduate counseling program in an attempt to advocate for a more balanced perspective. However, during our mutual exploration of various viewpoints on Whiteness, I came to understand that I could fall victim to the same tendency to dichotomize that I had observed in some of the readings for my Counseling Diverse Populations class. Throughout our ongoing conversation, we delved into numerous points of discourse, always encountering an impasse around the fundamental question of “how we know what we know.” It was our differing views on the role of Scripture that appeared to underlie our divergent interpretations of the issue. Both of us professed belief in the “Christian” faith system, and both exhibited a strong desire to do “good” for those around us, a critical common ground that enabled our ongoing dialogue. Our discussions, when dissected into specific topics, revealed a majority of shared values, yet they consistently diverged over “how” those principles should be applied on a macro level.

Andrea

In my early interactions with Kyle, I will admit that I had a leaning toward placing him in a particular box with a particular label, and of course, my initial experiences became consistent with those leanings. I experienced him as a representation of an extreme political position, who
was defensive of that position and ready to argue to prove a point. As our interactions progressed, however, and we agreed to meet more regularly, I began to understand the inaccuracies and limits of applying such a label. Kyle was thoughtful and complex, and he deeply considered multiple aspects and perspectives of the topics that we discussed. I realized that he did not readily fit into any particular category.

Our early interactions centered around political issues with a particular focus on racial reconciliation, and at times it expanded to other issues such as gender socialization, gender roles in the church, and responses to the pandemic. I mused about how historical events shaped the sociocultural context through the development of laws and regulations that favored primarily the lawmakers at the time. I focused on the social construction of our current legal and political system, and Kyle focused on the equal application of the principles found in the pursuit of justice at the level of the individual. Those conversations typically began with curiosity and fairly quickly escalated to take on the tone of a debate. Kyle had also perceived a bias in my classroom toward what we eventually identified as a “more spontaneous” approach to spiritual issues, and he was eager to present another point of view.

In authentic self-reflection, I believe I perceived that his questions demonstrated a lack of understanding of the perspectives shared and discussions facilitated in class. The more he questioned my perspective and became eager to share his, the more I developed a desire to clarify my perspective. It seemed that our interaction had a cyclical nature of both attempting to explain ourselves and with each point made by either of us, the other became more intent on getting our own point across. As an educator who hopes to have something of value to offer my students, I experienced feeling a strong desire to be heard. At times, this desire took priority over hearing Kyle’s perspective and understanding where he was coming from. I recognized this desire to be heard early on, as I had noticed this about myself before, and marveled at how this personal issue of mine fueled the ongoing dialogue between the student and myself.
The Starting Points: How Our Spiritual Assumptions Shape Our Lenses for Viewing Race

As our dialogue ensued, and our conversations moved beyond the realm of Whiteness and into the realm of spirituality, the core of our differences, the underlying assumptions that both of us had and the resulting perspective through which we both viewed the authority and role of the Holy Spirit and scripture, began to take shape. We both believe in Biblical scripture and the Holy Spirit, but our starting points and methods diverged, reflecting apparent efforts to balance what both of us had internalized from our early experiences. Kyle was raised in a non-structured, even chaotic, household, in which he felt the pain of the unpredictable and craved the stability of objective moral principles. Andrea’s early experiences were embedded in a stable, highly structured, sometimes rigid, environment, in which she longed for a celebration of the spontaneity and life-giving moments of “being” fully in the present. In this section, we share our resulting guiding assumptions about scripture and the role of the Holy Spirit and how they inform our perspectives of race, as this turned out to comprise the core of our challenge in building the bridge.

Kyle

Authority of Scripture
The context in which I believe truth is presented is primarily through scripture and is revealed to us through the Holy Spirit. My idea around scripture is based on my belief in two theological concepts, known as the sufficiency and inerrancy of scripture. It is my core belief that these are the two areas of focus when it comes to understanding the authority of scripture. First, the Bible is inerrant, written by authors inspired by the Holy Spirit, and protected by God to remain His true word today. Because it is inerrant, we understand it to have all authority to prescribe an answer to all issues we face in the current age. Moreover, scripture is sufficient, meaning held within it is all we need as a lens to look at and address all issues concerning power, authority, and the establishment of a just structure by which we can all live. “All scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness, so
that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (New International Version, 2011, 2 Timothy 3:16-17). I believe scripture when applied in the proper context never contradicts itself and can be interpreted as the objective truth that defines the standard and practice of every person who claims to be a follower of Christ.

Authority of the Holy Spirit
It is my observation that the more our society grows to promote instant gratification, the more we seem to be interacting with the “Holy Spirit” in ways that contradict scripture, tradition, and reason. The danger I see is the more we allow culture to define the nature of “good,” the more we might fall victim to an emotional response being viewed as a moving of the Spirit. The danger I see is living in a society that begins to seek what tickles its ear (2 Timothy 4:3). We, as lay Christians, see a framing of such desires as part of the Holy Spirit’s inspirational power and loosely apply the power of the Holy Spirit to validate our new predisposition to instant gratification. I believe it is by denying ourselves a pattern entrenched in instant gratification that we find the “good” we all seek. Incorporating the Holy Spirit as our primary lens to navigate this world is essential for living out our Christian faith. With the Holy Spirit promised to be both our comforter and our truth, when we rely on Him, we can experience the full promise of God’s grace and humility needed to navigate this sin-filled world. We cannot miss that the Holy Spirit is not limited to providing comfort as defined by a subjective worldly lens. In fact, He gives comfort by removing that poisonous lens as we walk with Him through the process of sanctification. He is also not here to confirm “my truth,” but The Truth. I see His truth as everlasting and immeasurable and cannot be corrupted for those genuinely leaning on the Holy Spirit in their interactions with His word. It appears to me we have confused the balance of compassion and grace and the need for truth to provide it. Truth can feel uncomfortable for those living outside of God’s infinite promise. Sometimes the truth that the Holy Spirit is there to provide will feel very uncomfortable and convicting, but it will give the ultimate comfort if we yield to His will. The role of the Holy Spirit is to confirm the scripture, comfort the believer, and empower the believer to do God’s good work during our time in the finite. When
attempting to balance what I believe and what is helpful in the counseling setting, I see an integration approach as the most viable (Johnson, 2010). At the core of my belief is a faith that God’s design provides a way to address the biological, psychological, social, and spiritual aspects of the formation of problems and solutions.

Integration with Science
I also believe there is a way for all areas of science to be integrated into a biblical worldview, and at each level of scientific theory, we can find God’s design at its core. In my limited understanding of science, I understand the complexity of trying to hold what appears to be a more traditional viewpoint of scripture’s prescription for morality standards. Moreover, I understand the belief that its interaction with emerging scientific theories seems to contradict it. Proving that there is complete compatibility between what we are learning through scientific discovery and God’s word would require a different platform, so for the sake of this paper, I will not attempt to bring the two into harmony. I will say that I have found peace in the tension that the two opposing sides hold. If I shift my perspective, I can see some validity in people’s hesitation toward a more rigid application of scripture. However, I believe that when scripture is applied within context, the structure itself is the comfort we need to function well as a society and balance the tension. While the extreme focus on the structure is damaging, it is within the chaos, where truth is unobtainable, that I see the most damage being done. Maybe the gift of the simplistic prescription of how we are to be set apart from this world is more internally and externally holistically healing than boiling down our existence to the pursuit of the instant pleasures of the world. Perhaps His purpose is not to affirm our way, but perhaps our purpose is to find Him, and that is the most sustainable and loving path in this finite world.

Selective or misapplication of scripture, antithetical to the spirit of Jesus’s message, has led to some people’s dissonance with a more rigid application of scripture. I hold to the belief that scripture serves as the most viable solution for our present societal discourses and would have been for all previous societal issues if we sought a proper balance between the
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grace and truth it provides. This belief leads me to hesitate to accept post-
positive perspectives, as they lead to the potential of misdirection away
from the infinite promises of scripture. One recent perspective that has
been presented is the new identity-driven development of the oppressor
vs. oppressed model (differing from the original Marxist economic
presentation of it). One recent example of this is the analytical framework
of intersectionality applied on the macro scale, not unlike the Russian
revolution starting in the 1920s based on class. It is my observation that
these frameworks cultivate dichotomies and thus polarized thinking. My
objection to reading God’s word through the oppressor vs. oppressed lens,
such as intersectionality, is it feels like we are allowing this dichotomous
way of thinking to interpret scripture. It is not uncommon for people
to reject the gospel because it is not inclusive, and therefore oppressive.
What is happening is rather than letting scripture determine if this way of
thinking is compatible with God’s design and structure throughout both
the Old and New Testaments, we instead reject the message of the bible
when it is not compatible with whatever the current worldly lens promotes.
I believe that allowing the dominant world’s culture to interpret the Bible
has led to the very misapplication of it.

For example, as a country, we did not apply the proper biblical context
in the battle against slavery, and this resulted in the dominant worldview
interpreting it for us. We can look back on that and determine that what
some churches did, in support of slavery, was not in congruence with the
message of scripture. This country, even “the church”, validated chattel
slavery, they supported it, and they preached it. We dehumanized image
bearers of God because the dominant worldview was allowed to be the
lens through which we viewed scripture. In contrast, if we had sought to
use scripture, in its full context, to answer the questions about the legality
and morality of slavery, we would have taken no part in slavery. Still,
even minimally, we could point out the lack of context one might use
to compare the version of slavery referenced in the Bible to the abhorrent
chattel slavery that had no place in any society (see Exodus 21). Morally, we
would see the slave trade as antithetical to the Bible based on the treatment
of other image-bearers of God (see Philemon). Legally, we could have used
the context of the biblical description of slavery to denounce any use of the Bible to affirm chattel slavery’s existence since they are not comparable. Allowing culture to dictate the way we view scripture can be dangerous, but allowing scripture, in its totality, to guide the building of structures allows no room for the travesties done by selfish humans.

Summary

Viewing the Bible through the oppressor/oppressed lens feels like the reductionistic outcome of labeling specific physical characteristics of people and associating those descriptors with identities that follow the oppressor/oppressed dichotomy. Because that tends to be how culture is interpreting and implementing ideas today, I see this movement as insufficient and antithetical to the prescribed solution by scripture for the very issues we should all be in line to oppose. “We ALL, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (New International Version, 2011, Isaiah 53:6). The oppressor/oppressed narrative needs only to be seen through a biblical lens to destroy the growing dichotomy. We all have been oppressed by sin. The villain needs to be labeled only as the sin found within all of us. We are freed from the villain’s oppression by following Jesus in both the passive and active ways he showed us in his life. We do this by dying in each of our own ways, and God delivers us from the pain of that oppression. The villain is not found in any physical characteristic but in the manifestation of sin, and we need only to condemn that sin found within ourselves for us to find the peace we all crave.

Andrea

Authority of the Holy Spirit

My perspective is that ultimate authority lies in the living, breathing, active presence of the Holy Spirit. Part of my own struggle has been related to an orientation toward truth-seeking that is dependent on cognition, to the detriment of being and of action. Cognition is good, and as educators, we teach our students critical evaluation skills. Thinking without implementing knowledge into one’s life, however, can be useless.
Following Jesus without relying on the Holy Spirit to guide our steps, as we are currently in motion, can be empty. I can live completely in my head and “think” my way into a Christian orientation and life, but the risk here is that I fail to see opportunities to live godly right in the present moment. Thinking also lends itself well to judging, criticizing, and competing, all of which are antithetical to Jesus’s message (Buker, 2021). As such, I believe that Jesus’s “Good News” is that we can all relate to God right now. After Jesus’s body left the earth, the Holy Spirit remained, allowing us to continue to live a godly life in the present moment, as life continues to unfold. Ultimate authority thus resides within the movement and guidance of the Holy Spirit. Scripture is certainly relevant, and it is also largely a product of memory and of cognitive, rather than of present, visceral experience. Though I assume scripture contains ultimate authority, I lean more toward the Holy Spirit as my guide and interpreter of ultimate authority and scripture as a reflection of that authority.

Authority of Scripture

From the launching point of the Holy Spirit being necessary to inspire godly living, including the writing of the scriptures, I see the role of the scriptures in today’s world as a reflection of the dynamic, living word. This suggests that the relevance of scripture can actually evolve as an individual grows in Christ and expands their sensitivity to the Holy Spirit. One way to explain this is through the consideration of context, during which multiple layers of variables interact to create an overall setting through which Truth is experienced and interpreted. In the world of family therapy, counselors consider that the family unit is an interaction of multiple factors, including (a) each member and their individual emotions, thoughts, and interpretations, (b) the values and culture of the family as a whole, (c) the social systems, such as religious, cultural, ethnic, regional, etc., within which the family is nested, and (d) the place in time of the family’s current experiences. When considering these many layers, it is clear that the family as a whole is much greater than merely the sum of each individual family member’s unique experiences and perspectives. Because of the various ways in which each person is influenced within their multiple systems, I believe it necessary to consider the context within
which scriptures are written and the individual perspectives of each writer, along with the acknowledgment that though each writer has their own limitations, their perspectives contribute to Truth as a whole. As each new piece of information about context expands the understanding of the purposes of scriptures, so does our understanding of its relevance for our lives. For these reasons, I take a “levels of explanation” perspective on the integration of psychology and Christianity (Johnson, 2010), which starts with scientific research, scrutinized to the highest humanly possible levels of validity, and moves to consider scripture within what we know about God’s creation. The consideration of scripture in light of science requires the interaction of the Holy Spirit to create moments of transformation in how Truth is understood and experienced. In this way, scripture is assumed to contain authority, but our interpretations of scripture are assumed to need the Holy Spirit to guide our ongoing scrutiny of and greater awareness of what is real.

Integration with Science
My value of science in the process of understanding God and scripture, and the importance I place on context to understanding truth, lead to certain implications about scriptures in today’s world. First, the history of how our current ways of knowing have evolved has led us to the necessity of considering what reality might be constructed from social interactions. Traditional positivist and post-positivist ways of knowing, relying on control and manipulation of variables, assume that variables can exist separately from people whether they can be accurately measured or not, an assumption that does not seem to hold up with emotional experiences (Heppner et al., 2016). Newer ways of knowing recognize that an individual experiences emotionality and cognition in unique and overlapping ways, acknowledging that the individual’s perspective “constructs” their reality. Despite the individual accuracy in the constructivist way of knowing, it does not consider systemic variables. Without considering systemic variables, systems that grow in ways that are not supportive of certain individuals are never measured or scrutinized, such as is the case in Kyle’s concern with the oppressor/oppressed model. Given what has been understood in family therapy,
the lack of scrutiny of systems can result in permission given to ongoing structures that are not supportive of the growth of certain members. In the case of family, for instance, failure to scrutinize the system can result in (a) blaming the scapegoat, such as a person experiencing an addictive disorder, for the problem in how the family functions as a whole and even (b) enabling ongoing abuse in the family.

If we rely only on constructivist ways of knowing to learn about individual experiences, then the solution to larger problems, involving many factors that may be out of any one person’s direct control, relies only on the individual. In this sense, the individual is expected to rely only on themselves for recovery and sometimes even blamed for their experiences, while the systemic issue remains. To better detect and measure systemic influences and interactions, social constructionism has developed. Social constructionist perspectives consider various levels of an experience, from an individual to their interactions with significant others, to the embeddedness of their interactions in various systems, and how this all changes over time (Erford, 2015). One such example focuses on the social dynamics of race, which has been present in academic research design textbooks for decades. The original purpose of a social constructionist perspective is to move away from dichotomizing individual experiences to a broader consideration of the multiple factors that generate an individual’s, or even a group’s, experience. In my professional observation, it has been successful in doing so until recent political motivations have used the social constructionist language to dichotomize experiences to “us” vs. “them” thinking.

Second, the nature of using reductionism to scrutinize interactions, which are more and more complex as the system grows, can lead to misrepresentations of truth. Using reductionistic methods, a piece of the truth can initially be uncovered, such as in the example of multiple regression, which measures how two or more independent variables predict a dependent variable. For example, past research has measured that both religious pressures and support for religious autonomy predict Christian religious development (Walker & Lang, 2023; Walker & Rhoades, 2021). Reducing a group of Christians to these measured relationships may lead us to conclude that Christians experience pressures in a positive
way. When we add complexity to the analysis and listen to Christians’ voices about their experiences with religious pressures, however, we see a different story. Support for religious autonomy predicts positive growth, but when religious pressures are introduced, its ability to predict growth weakens (Walker et al., 2021). Furthermore, when individuals experience doubts about God that are normative for their development and experiences, simultaneously experiencing religious pressures can undermine their ability to proceed through doubtful times and continue to grow in their faith (Walker et al., 2023). Analysis of a large sample helps us uncover some important trends embedded in a system, but if we reduce people to general conclusions without considering their voices describing various nuances to the results, we misunderstand what is going on in the system.

To truly understand people, sometimes we must learn humans’ experiences as narrative wholes. This means we must hear their stories in their entirety, rather than reducing learning to select variables. Though we must be careful to maintain validity in inquiries involving story-telling, which often utilize qualitative data, this is within the realm of science (for example, see Walker & Balk, 2013). When individuals report having similar experiences that are not due to personal mental health problems, that is a sign that a system might need improvement. If we do not hold systems accountable for their constructed values that create experiences for members, then very unhealthy environments can result. But if we rely only on reductionism and determinism in our scientific inquiry, we may fail to detect unhealthy environments. The way I discover knowledge and conceptualize racial issues in today’s world involves both individual reports of experiences and scrutiny of systems. In the process of discovery, involving the highest possible level of human scrutiny of the methods, I then integrate this new knowledge with scripture and rely on the Holy Spirit to provide illumination. Sometimes this new information with the quickening of the Holy Spirit generates a new interpretation of scriptures understood differently in the past. Without the Holy Spirit, knowledge of research and scripture can be inaccurate at best and stagnant or irrelevant at worst.
Summary
Living with these assumptions moves Christianity from a set of cognitions to a way of being fully in the present. It recognizes that Truth is living and dynamic. It is a courageous way to live, not depending entirely on a written script but, instead, leaning on a presence that is within us, if we allow it. It requires openness and leads to spontaneity, things that may be uncomfortable for many, including myself. This perspective is vulnerable because one must recognize that they could be wrong, and is authentic because it relies on a genuine connection with God in the present time. But it is life-giving, and it allows for the necessary social changes that bring more congruence with Jesus’s mission. Anxiety-provoking for some who prefer the structure of an external measure, my perspective relies on the meaning within the text of Jesus’s words. If an external measure is needed, the life of Jesus is that measure. Let goodness, in any given situation or behavior, be determined by whether or not it reflects Jesus’s path, whether or not it is loving.

The Process: Our Experiences of Interacting Around Issues of Spirituality and Whiteness

Kyle
One of the main principles found in systems theory is the idea of circular causality. As I begin to identify the key moments that, from my perspective, propelled this conversation, I am concerned about the appearance of linear causality framing. Believing wholeheartedly that circular causality is a superior way to consider the issue, as it prevents dichotomization, I want to stress that I have currently a deeper understanding and appreciation for the complexity of the problem that drove me into this conversation than I did initially. Entering the summer courses of my first year of graduate school, my journey with the dissonance of the current climate had reached its tipping point. A concept within systems theory highlighted the complexity I was beginning to understand how sometimes, “the solution is the problem” (Watzlawick et
al., 1974, pp. 31-39). I had spent some time trying to figure out why that was true of everyone else’s solution to their problems, and I now began to learn to do that for myself on these issues.

Walking into Dr. Walker’s office that first time was incredibly intimidating. Having only ever experienced conversations about these issues vicariously through social/media sources, my fear was that this conversation would villainize me like I had seen in my own “echo chamber” in the summer of 2020. It is now clear, that the network you were watching and/or the social media influencers you were following, gave only a version of what was happening in the world around that time. When I refer to “my echo chamber,” I also acknowledge my belief that everyone, including myself, fell victim to seeing the most fearful version of the social dynamics around race as it related to their self-interests and was propagated by their affirming spheres of influence. When presenting my view of these exhaustive issues for the first time, it was clear that Dr. Walker and I had very little real exposure to the other person’s side of the dichotomy.

The first pivotal moment happened when, in my frustration, Dr. Walker attended to my frustration by moving from behind her desk and into the chair across from mine. This became a crucial part of our conversational pattern, as it became a symbol of a safe space where I felt comfortable, as a graduate student, to express my points of disagreement without having to be reminded of the power differential I had built up in my mind due to our educational positions. We became two humans, intent on finding answers, and intentional about doing so in the least polarized way. I can reflect now on how crucial this move was for Dr. Walker to engage this way. The second was the pattern I set, in which after every conversation I would initiate a follow-up email pointing out the most positive aspects of the conversation and focusing on gratitude for the time Dr. Walker took to engage in the conversation that day. These two consistent practices set the tone for the intention and execution of a positive experience around each meeting.

The point of contention about the existence and solution to race relations was the most powerful motivator in my approach to the conversation. The pattern usually circled around what we saw as the problem, why we thought the problem existed, and most importantly to me, how we attempted to
solve the current issues around race. As a graduate counseling student, I was learning about the importance of demonstrating unconditional positive regard in the therapeutic relationship while simultaneously experiencing dissonance about how others consider and value me as a White male. I had noticed a pattern of unconditional positive regard being applied in all directions and to all groups, except in the direction of the White male.

As with many issues, finding what was “true” became nearly insurmountable for us early in the conversation. I had spent enough time in research and interacted with enough content that my schemas around these issues seemed unquestionable. I quickly realized Dr. Walker operated from certain schemas as well, but they affirmed a different position. The hardest part of the conversation pattern was initially having my concerns dismissed because of my physical characteristics as a White male, as had been the case in numerous interactions prior to this one. The assumption seemed to be that my desire to defend my “privilege” caused me to object to certain perspectives of race and Whiteness. Since my undergraduate years, I have struggled through the same assumptions made about these issues albeit being significantly more passive in my approach to my dissonance. During these earlier years, I had a hard time accepting the label of the “oppressor”, due to the complexities of my own chaotic experiences in my systems throughout childhood. After being educated on my “privilege”, I struggled with depression and anxiety while navigating credentialing to become a high school teacher in California. I then enlisted in the military to serve my country at a search and rescue unit and finally struggled again to transition back into society upon exiting the military. My not expressing my perspective and staying quiet had led to a very unhealthy pattern of processing emotions throughout my journey. I struggled and was not as successful as I would have liked to be in those other attempts at building a life to help people. I believe now that my lack of success was due to not knowing how to process my own pain and help myself, subconsciously believing the narrative that as a white man, I had no reason to feel anything less than privileged. What I felt after George Floyd’s death, and the direction of the mainstream narrative to find the villain of his story, was that despite my own story, I was disqualified from sharing in the experience of pain and suffering,
strictly because I was a “White male.” It took me several years to begin to express these objections and the pain associated with them, and it was the skills I had learned during my little time in the counseling program that led me to believe I needed to do so.

Within the initial stages of our conversation, I perceived the automatic assumptions of intent that influenced the direction of the conversation from both Dr. Walker and myself. At first, it seemed to me that when I would begin to present my objections against the unquestioned assumptions of “White male privilege,” it was met with responses like, “So you are saying you don’t believe that minorities experience oppression?” It was the most challenging part for me to show my unconditional positive regard for all people while simultaneously objecting to what I was experiencing as the application of the one perspective that seemed to have a monopoly over how we were to show this compassion. In the initial few conversations, it felt that each point of disagreement I stated was met with the assumption it was coming from a place void of compassion. The work then became to discover how my assumptions about Dr. Walker’s view of these theories were vastly different than how she would describe and utilize them. I had sometimes seen dismissal from her when it was her own “desire to be heard” responding, and I was ill-equipped earlier on to recognize that dichotomous “us versus them” mentality in my own process. My desire to be heard also quickly became the focus of my wanting to continue the conversation. I switched from wanting to be there to convince her to change her mind, to seeking the acknowledgment that it is possible for me to have my objections to assumptions about White, male privilege and still be seen as a compassionate future counselor. It was not until we approached different aspects of these issues that I saw the same motivation for her continuance of the conversation. She too had a story, a dissonance felt within culture, and had the desire to balance what she saw as painful to those like her.

The hardest part for me in this phase of the conversation was to admit my solution to the problem was as much part of the issue as what I was accusing the opposing side of. The irony was I had to acknowledge my own significant role in perpetuating the conversation in the “us versus them” pattern. I was wrong to believe that opposing views came from a place void
of positive intent. I was wrong to believe by fighting back I was becoming the “hero” against the “villain” of the opposing side. I slowly realized the lens I opposed was the one I was using to approach the issue, and I was wrong for doing so. I realized, “we all, like sheep, had gone astray”, I too needed to separate from the dichotomization and find the commonality in our shared struggle with the broken human experience. It was only by engaging with someone, like Dr. Walker, assuming positive intent, and finding our commonality that I was able to truly grow, which feels antithetical to the general solution of many on both sides of each issue we face.

One area of note, it was in the tense moments of disagreements that I slowly realized the impact that humor and humility, on my part, could play in these issues. Because I am in constant need of reminding that God does not need me to solve the world’s problems, I need to find a way to show that in the conversation. I started joking about looking forward to the day when we were both sitting in front of God laughing about how silly it was to think that any of us could figure out His way on our own. I was seeking to show awareness of my need for humility when discussing any hierarchical system, with the infinite perspective that we “are all one in Christ Jesus” (New International Version, 2011, Galatians 3:28). The work to me was our realization that we might not win the other over to our perspective entirely, but we could make a choice to find peace in our differing views, knowing that God’s will is more powerful than our preferred solutions.

Andrea

This desire to be heard channeled into a passion felt for the issues discussed, and each topic triggered a deep stirring within me that appeared initially to be centered on a desire for more social justice in the world and an awareness, growing within me in prior years, of my privilege as a White woman in that world. In those years, I had been blissfully unaware of the struggles of many of my Black compatriots and have had to undergo the realization that my experience does not generalize to all people. The process of understanding this involved many “aha” moments and recognition of my need to humble myself to honor the experiences of others. Hearing Kyle’s perspective on race and the feeling he described that young, White men are starting to
report experiencing collectively was triggering for me. I questioned, “How could a White male feel marginalized in contemporary society?”

After more dialogue, I began to see that we were focusing on different aspects of the same issue. My focus has been on understanding the needs of other less dominant and thus less privileged groups and, in so doing, becoming more sensitive to their experiences. In this way, I hope to continue to be an alibi to those experiencing oppression and an advocate for social justice. As I pressed Kyle to try to understand their experiences, I began to realize that he was focusing on something else. When asked directly, he stated that racism and oppression have existed as part of the sociocultural context in the U.S. and that it was uncompromisingly wrong. His focus, however, had been on what he perceived as proposed solutions to racism and oppression, rather than understanding the experience. Our initial miscommunication about this fundamental point had fueled the tennis match. I gradually began to acknowledge that if systems could be created with a bias against one racial group, it might also be possible that systems could be created with a bias against another. Seeing Kyle make adamant and passionate claims that young, White men are feeling damned before being given a chance required me to acknowledge this experience as different and unique from what I have understood to be true. It was not helpful for me to express a foregone conclusion as if I knew more about his experience than he did. When I initially did so, it resulted in more obstacles for our communication to overcome. The key to understanding this appeared to lie in suspending judgment and listening to Kyle’s perspective.

One of the quickest reactions I had of all was when Kyle brought up the opinion that we overreacted to the pandemic as a society. With certain individuals being far more vulnerable to the virus than others, and the number of deaths due to Covid and covid-related complications, I viewed it as another social justice issue. To me, it seemed insensitive at best, and egocentric at worst, to make such claims. It triggered an anger in me that brought me to a shortened temper and an escalated response of, “This is where I draw the line. People are dying.” At that moment, I failed to hear or understand Kyle’s perspective and why he holds this perspective. Our conversation that day, and any meaningful communication about the
issue, ended soon after my reaction. I began to reflect on whether it is even possible for individuals with such divergent perspectives on contemporary issues to understand one another. Worse, was I selling myself out by engaging in dialogue about a perspective that seemed so contrary to Truth to me? I continued to battle with these conflicting thoughts, of wanting to connect with this student and also wanting to not compromise and enable perspectives that I had considered to be destructive.

In retrospect, I felt very passionately about the issues, and I wish to examine that passion. It seems to emerge from a desire for social justice, yes, but also from an inner desire to be a person who cares about those things. Doing so makes me feel good about myself, and in this way, it can sometimes be self-serving. This also assumes that my perspective, typically reflecting my political leanings, is the only or the best way to solve problems related to social justice. The humility required for me to make this observation also fueled a growing realization that my perspective may not be the only way to address such things. This realization allowed me to see the limits of my perspective, that I had actually become somewhat attached to the way that I believe things should go, just as I had made a similar realization of my White privilege in recent years.

Kyle appeared to feel a similar passion about the issues, and the process of dialoguing about them led to heightened emotions, an intensity of frustration when combined with each of our own desires to be heard, and verbal escalations. I learned that there are times when I simply needed to stop talking and listen, such as the times when Kyle shared about his childhood struggle, his emotionally chaotic and financially disadvantaged background, and a painful experience in the Coast Guard of being passed over for an opportunity due to an affirmative action policy. During these moments, when I could sense his vulnerability and see the pain on his face, my egocentrism started to fade. Our interactions became less about proving a point, which I actually still hold, and more about connecting with this young man. Sharing my perspective and being heard and understood seemed less important, even trivial, in the face of this person who had himself experienced suffering. I yielded my so-called “need” to be understood to what I discovered was an even
greater yearning, coming from a deeper, even more relevant spiritual place, the desire to understand. I continue to marvel at the courage Kyle had in sharing his views, as well as the experiences that very reasonably and rationally informed them.

The transformation in how Kyle and I related to one another came with this discovery. It was a metamorphosis, with me starting as an individual being somewhat influenced by her environment, to movement toward a strength of resolve in standing in my own autonomy, to ultimately having an impetus to support Kyle while he genuinely searches for truth. Our conversation played out a developmental process that has paralleled in occurrence over my life span, a process in which I have gradually learned how to give support, without condition, to another person. As I developed in our relationship, my role in our interaction required a detachment of sorts so that another person, in this case, Kyle, could rest in the safety of the relationship while they continued to find the truth. In this way, my own search for truth continues in the process of expanding and contracting like breath, and with each sequence being more able to understand and accept (though not necessarily agree) than previously. As the dialogue between Kyle and me continued, what emerged was an understanding that though his methods and starting points are quite different, Kyle wants the same things that I do. He wants peace in the world, justice (in terms of equal opportunity though not necessarily outcome), and safety. As time progressed, I became less interested in dialoguing about the issues that started our conversation, through the usual two-hour tennis match, and more interested in how he was doing with it. I was more concerned about hurting him than before and chose my words very carefully when we did dialogue. I cared deeply about the person with whom I was dialoging.

What I am describing is the development of care.

The Takeaway: What We Learned from the Process

Kyle

In the fall of 2021, as I read through the book, *Coddling of the American Mind* (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2019), I significantly resonated with the
content found in chapter three. The title of this chapter was “The Untruth of Us Versus Them: Life is a Battle of Good and Evil.” About six months into our conversation, I read this chapter and shifted the lens through which I saw the discussion. Until this point, I can reflect on how much the “us versus them” mindset framed the conversation. I entered with the goal of addressing this very mindset, but the goal was coming from the lens reflecting an “us versus them” mentality. I had seen the other solution to the problem being the problem very clearly, but I had not yet considered I might be on the same path in my patterns of dichotomous thinking. It is worth noting that, despite initially falling into the “us versus them” dichotomy in our early interactions, both of us recognized the harm inherent in this perspective. This acknowledgment formed the cornerstone that allowed our constructive dialogue to flourish. Assuming positive intent, even when Dr. Walker and I proposed differing solutions to a shared problem, fostered the patience and grace necessary to maintain this productive conversation.

Relationally, the most notable takeaway from this experience is finding peace with another person with such a distinctly different worldview. The “us versus them” is not a new concept, nor is it a trivial one. It appears to be the view we all resort to. Neither myself nor Dr. Walker would allow us to fall into that pattern. It was a time in my life when I needed to act out the concepts of truly having unconditional positive regard, empathy, grace, and love. These phrases are easy to model when all we do is surround ourselves in our echo chambers and dichotomize those who oppose us. It would have been easy for me to do so. The bittersweet result of this three-year (and counting) experiment is that I no longer can allow myself to stay in that very chamber. My views have not changed in principle, but I no longer see any one of my fellow men or women as the villain for holding an opposing view. I now crave more of these types of conversations. I crave those seeking conflict, not to prove them wrong or right, but to continue challenging our current climate’s pattern of dichotomization. It was hard work to navigate the forest of polarity, but I feel I have found a way out of being lost in the endless loop of polarity only ever leading me to more dissonance. I aim to pull as many people
down the path with me as possible. We as humans deserve to find our way out of this destructive dichotomy, and my prayer is that this experiment provides a method.

Biblically, I understand more now the complexity of finding what the truth is. It reminds me of that ancient proverb of blind men identifying the elephant. Based on our individual experiences with God, we have part of the story, but it is ignorant of us to present our findings as though they show the whole picture. It took three years of interacting in this dialogue, sharing differing views and interpretations of scripture, applying them in different ways, and finally trying to bring ourselves back to our shared view of the authority for me to figure out how it was possible to come to such different conclusions about what was right. I had only ever known the opposing view to be “just wrong.” Moreover, I applied hostile intent to why they would espouse such antithetical beliefs. At the end of our conversation, there was no negative intent to be found. We both profess a love for Jesus, seek His will over ours, and find ourselves missing the application of grace aspect of the balance between truth and grace Jesus modeled. It is essential to show the grace Jesus modeled in the pursuit of showing us the truth. He presented Truth but did so in a way where his intent was always clearly motivated by his love for us. “Then Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing’” (New International Version, 2011, Luke 23:34). He understands human struggles, and lovingly propels us to a life free from the patterns of sin that lead to pain (Hebrews 5: 15-16). I can say, from my perspective, that it was because I leaned into seeking the balance that Jesus modeled; I now feel less hate, less anxiety, less frustration, and less animosity. I feel more peace, love, passion, and purpose than when I entered. I continue to engage, but allow the Holy Spirit to guide how I do so (most of the time).

Deepening My Faith

The most crucial part involved in this process is the deepening of my faith. It was no longer okay to sit with the “well, that’s what the Bible says” argument. It is not that my belief in the sufficiency of the Bible changed, but the depth in which I knew what it was addressing, contextually and spiritually. Having conversations in long forms, such as with Dr. Walker,
served as the necessary motivation to deepen my understanding of what it was I was believing and, in turn, deepened my faith in it. One thing to note, like the scientific method, I had to engage in this journey with the assumption that I might be wrong and be hungry for something that might disprove what I believed. At the same time, I would balance these conversations, along with the content they drove me to, with the exploration and conversations with those who played a part in developing my schemas in the first place. Holding the two divergent ideas up against each other equally allowed for clarity on where we differ and why we do. I could go forth and use this deeper understanding to pull those on my side of the dichotomy away from the polarity pathway they were on.

Andrea

My takeaways from this experiment involve living within an Ethic of Care, forming a habit of recognizing common experiences among us and cultivating self-awareness. What does it mean to live with an Ethic of Care? Jesus, religious scholars, and counseling researchers all point to the importance of this component. For Christians, Jesus’s primary command offers the most meaning. This command was articulated in John 13:34 as, “A new commandment I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another” (*New International Version*, 2011). For many Christians, this is the most important command and central to what it means to be a Christian. Religious scholarship also mirrors this with Karen Armstrong’s writings, who studied all the major world religions to identify what these religions have in common (see Armstrong, 2011). She discovered that the common thread is compassion and the importance of being intentional about not harming others. This is meaningful to Christians through the Golden Rule, “do to others what you would have them do to you” (*New International Version*, 2011, Matthew 7:12). Armstrong’s words, “It is more important to be compassionate than it is to be right” (Armstrong, 2008), speak well to any tendencies we have toward debates or intellectual conversations over presumed truths. Finally, the counseling literature has replicated a similar finding in empirical studies on predictors of positive change, finding that the single most
important predictor of positive change is the therapeutic relationship (Lambert & Barley, 2001). Experiencing a safe, supportive relationship, in which a person can be “held” while managing their thoughts and feelings appears to be a necessary condition for finding resolution and creating a peaceful existence. Given all of this evidence, it was necessary for me to live out the dialogue with Kyle within an Ethic of Care, in order for me to remain consistent with my values and the scientific evidence. But doing so was not something that was forced or took a great deal of effort. Recognizing the human behind the perspective came naturally in this situation. As Kyle described his early family, emotional and health struggles, and the challenges his current family faced relocating to Tulsa, it was easy to understand his perspective and how it came to be. It is difficult to stay polarized after understanding how a person’s lived experience comes into play. And this has the effect of melting the polarization in the conversation.

The next major takeaway is engaging in dialogue in which one is searching for what is similar and common to both perspectives. This involves wholehearted acceptance that neither person is inherently better than the other. For Christians I would hope that this comes naturally; for instance, Romans 3:10 states, “There is no one righteous, not even one”. Further, Romans 3:23 says, “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (New International Version, 2011). In addition to adding to our sense of humility, these verses speak to the idea that we are all in the same boat. In addition to Biblical scripture, counseling research also speaks to the importance of a sense of common humanity. Deliberately recognizing how our situations are similar to others increases a sense of compassion and connectedness and protects against narcissism (Neff, 2011). Finding a sense of common humanity also helps build self-compassion, which, ironically predicts higher levels of altruism, empathic concern, and compassion for others (Neff & Pommier, 2013). Though Kyle and I originally occupied very different perspectives on the topics mentioned in this manuscript, similarities emerged. We both highly value and seek more social justice in the world. We both want a world that values every person equally while recognizing and appreciating individual differences and unique paths. We
both want safety and peace in our worlds for our children and ourselves. Though we describe quite different ways of getting there, our similarities are stronger and more prevalent than our differences.

The final takeaway for me is being aware of what I feel and why I feel it. This is especially important in terms of one’s ego and when it creeps into the process of dialoging. When one becomes so attached to a perspective that they identify with it, a dangerous thing can occur; they stop questioning it. In this way, it is very important to maintain humility, in terms of honesty with oneself about what one believes and how one interacts with others about it. Remember I Corinthians 13:4-7, “Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres” (New International Version, 2011). Another important outcome of self-awareness is lightheartedness and humor; when we are humble, it is okay to laugh at ourselves when we notice ourselves being too attached to a perspective. Over time, my conversations with Kyle took on a playful tone, and the intensity of our conversations would relax into laughing. In this way, we became willing to accept influence when appropriate. I am now much more aware of what I say, both in and out of class, related to Whiteness and other political perspectives, and seek to find ways of expressing myself honestly while promoting relationship development with others and avoiding triggering others with different perspectives. I do this by, again, looking for areas of agreement and common experiences we share.

There is a necessity for commitment to and engagement in the work. There are times when the dialogue feels uncomfortable, frustrating, and confusing. The work involves the transformation of these experiences into a willingness to manage the tension, acceptance, curiosity, and commitment. At any point, one of us could have made a judgment about the level of productivity of our discussions and gotten too busy to reschedule. But we both seemed to recognize the importance of our interactions, that there was a higher truth guiding us to continue to try
and understand one another. We both committed to the process and in this way, we both became more hopeful about the fractured division that is our current social milieu. Without this inner guidance of the Holy Spirit, I do not believe we would be writing this article today. The lesson would have been lost. Putting forth great effort yields great rewards.

**Implications: One Unified Voice**

To summarize, we both discovered and/or deepened our understanding of several truths, and we speak to them here in our collective, unified voice.

1. Christianity is a non-political orientation. Being Christian means being a follower of Jesus and Jesus’s spiritual counterpart, the Holy Spirit, and is not synonymous with aligning with a particular political party.

2. Integration is complex. In a higher education context for counseling, being both Spirit-Empowered and Christian involves a complex process of integrating our understanding of human development, creation, and the scientific process with the teachings and message of Jesus as depicted in Biblical scripture. What appears as a straightforward process can become quite complex as we consider the views and assumptions held by Christians based on unique life experiences and influences of family values.

3. Those who follow Jesus are diverse. While Christians from a myriad of backgrounds generally try to adhere to Jesus’s commandments to “love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength” and to “love your neighbor as yourself” (*New International Version*, 2011, Mark 12:30-31), the ways in which Christians seek to fulfill these commands vary significantly. Although we may not agree with all the methods each other uses and may strongly disagree with some, we believe that people across the entire political spectrum can fulfill this command.
4. It is important to assume positive intent in others with different views. At times, our both holding this assumption was the strand that kept us committed to bridge-building.

5. Commit to the process, but do not try to control it. We never succeeded in “winning the other over to our side.” The purpose of dialogue must be to understand, not to change, the other. Express gratitude for the opportunity to learn from the other person.

6. Dichotomies are almost always false, and false dichotomization leads to polarization. We found that when we viewed the topics of our discussions through a socially constructed dichotomy, such as “Democrat vs. Republican,” it led to an oversimplification of the issue and, inevitably, assumptions made about the other. We learned to embrace the complexity of each issue.

7. Staying connected keeps us healthy. Psychological flourishing, which encompasses positive change, occurs in the context of connectedness to the community (Munoz et al., 2020). In maintaining relationships, we fulfill God’s command to love one another, and by continuing to love each other, despite our differences, we will heal our political fractures and our communities.

Conclusions

In retrospect, we both see that, though frustrating and difficult at times, the three-year dialogue became a relationship-building, grace-embodying, and Truth-discovering process. Our commitment to this process led to the realization of solutions to the initial problem we identified, society’s tendency to forego what is in the best interest of the community for the sake of self. The process was helpful for the student to develop his professional counselor identity and for the instructor to better understand the perspectives and needs of some students. We built a bridge across the expanse of our political perspectives to create a separate space in which we could appreciate our differences without
judgment of the other. Perhaps more relevant was our realization of the diverse ways of integrating Christian faith principles into our real-world experiences and our expanded appreciation for that diversity. In this way, our Spirit-empowered, Christian university community is strengthened, and we are better able to draw upon the psychological benefits of its membership.

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