“Swimming upstream”: White privilege and racial justice activism in education in South Africa
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Abstract: This research aims to examine what motivates “white” people working to bring more racial justice to South Africa through education to become involved in this work. Using theories of narrative identity and social action, as well as drawing on previous studies of white identity in South Africa and the USA, this qualitative study explores the narratives of white racial justice activists from a South African perspective. The analysis revealed three large narratives that guided the sense of self of participants. The three big stories are as follows: “People Are People”, “Following God”, and “Quality Education for All”, which provided the underlying framework for the motivations and moral action of participants. These narratives highlight a move away from overt prejudice and is a sincere attempt to positively engage with the “new South Africa”, however by not engaging with race at all, it could be viewed as avoiding the guilt of continued racial privilege.

Subjects: Education - Social Sciences; Ethnic Identity; Race & Ethnicity
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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT
This article focuses on the anti-racism efforts by “white” people involved in the field of education in South Africa, and unpacks the motivations behind these actions and what encourages them to become involved in this work. The research uses a narrative identity framework to reveal the guiding narratives that inform the motivations and moral action of participants. The findings reveal that these narratives highlight a shift from overt prejudice and is a sincere attempt to positively engage with the “new South Africa”, however by not engaging with race at all, it could be viewed as avoiding the guilt of continued racial privilege. Globally, debates on racial privilege are becoming more intense. In South Africa, the #Rhodesmustfall protest movement reveals that despite decades of struggle for social justice and equality, racism continues to be a pressing social issue. This article contributes to these wider discussions on anti-racism efforts and social justice.
1. Introduction
This article explores the relationship between identity, motivation, and action in examining what motivates white people working to bring more racial justice to South Africa through education, to become involved in this work. In South Africa where race, language, and living area continue to be the most prominent forms of self-identification for people (Erwin & Pillay, 2019), and where, 27 years after the democratic transition, racism and white privilege are at the centre of debates around social justice and equality, this article explores what alternative narratives white people, involved in racial justice efforts, use to define themselves and guide their actions.

2. Background to the study
Over the years, there have been ongoing debates in the United States about white privilege. One prompt for this particular research in fact was a debate that arose on social media in May 2014 over the phrase “check your privilege” when an 18-year-old Princeton first-year student published an article in a student publication where he called the phrase a “leftist moral shut-down to any argument” (Fortgang, 2014). This resulted in a significant number of counter articles that detailed the varying points of view. Some agreed with Fortgang (2014) that this “white privilege” discourse is being overused, denying the hard work of individuals (Ponnu 2014), while others claimed his arguments showed that he did not understand the nature of the white privilege that he was critiquing (Gastfriend May 7, 2014).

Conversations about white privilege are equally explosive in South Africa. In March 2019, musician Danny K created controversy when he challenged white people, via the social media app twitter, to “call out racism” rather than being silent, and to come to terms with privilege. The tweet prompted a response from Western Cape premiere Helen Zille, who declared that talking about privilege is a form of racist “identity politics (that turns ‘whiteness’ into the source of SA’s problems)” (Zeeman, 2019).

The interchange prompted intense dialogue online, with some white people siding with Zille, some defending Danny K, and others pointing out that a privileged person commenting on privilege and being rewarded for it marginalizes the oppressed voices that have been expressing similar sentiments for years (Cele, 2019).

Prior to this, Gillian Schutte’s (2013) opinion piece entitled “Dear White People” and its exposition of white privilege garnered over 500 responses (most of them quite vehement), with counter arguments from Black Consciousness authors criticizing “white privilege” talk as side-lining structural issues in favour of critiquing white perceptions and discourses (Mngxitama & Nkopo, 2013). On the other hand there are those in South Africa who not only question Schutte’s (2013) definition of white privilege, but to the contrary, claim that white South Africans are special targets of crime. The trope of white people as particular victims of crime, the feeling of white (or, particularly, Afrikaner, which is a specific ethnic permutation of whiteness) loss of cultural and political power, and continued feelings of victimization continue to permeate the consciousness of many white South Africans (Albert, 2012; Steyn, 2004; Verwey & Quayle, 2012).

Current South African studies show that some attention has been given to the ways that white people (especially Afrikaners, but also English speakers) are constructing their identities in post-apartheid South Africa in the absence of political privilege (Albert, 2012; Dolby, 2001; Steyn, 2001; Verwey & Quayle, 2012), as well as how whiteness redefines and hides itself to keep power through colour-blind discourse (Ballard, 2003). Using colour-blind language to mask existing inequality and leave the status-quo unquestioned has been termed “colour-blind racism” by scholars in the USA such as Bonilla-Silva (2010). Studies reveal that overall, white people are constructing themselves as victims and ignore or minimise the role of apartheid in shaping their current privileged status. Through different strategies, they attempt to retain their privilege.
However, the literature does not explore alternative identities. If there are some people who are not constructing their personal narratives around threat and victimization, but rather acknowledging their privilege and working to create a more just society, how is this coming about? Why do they not, as Case (2012, p. 78) argues “… rely on their privilege and avoid objecting to the racial oppression that provides the privilege “… “ given that the elaborate system of white privilege, allows white people to “ignore and neutralise race when race benefits whites”. In addition Mallett et al. (2008, p. 452), note that advocating for an “outgroup” is not motivated by self-interest, as it “… requires time and energy, and can be perceived as offering little in the way of personal gain—especially when the benefits are for members of a different group.”

There are few empirical studies pointing out how white people who are actively attempting to break free from recycled apartheid discourses and working for a more racially just society conceive of their identity. The aim of this article is to understand how participants in this study see themselves and their racial justice work in the current South African context and to hopefully broaden the available narratives on what it means to be white in South Africa to include those who are not constructing their identities around preserving privilege.

3. Racial justice in education

Anti-racism has a long history in South Africa, and in many ways, is part of the larger story of trying to disempower whiteness. However, this term labels people in terms of what they are against, rather than what they are “for” (Warren, 2010). Given the “substantive,” rather than strictly formal, view of equality that the South African constitution takes (Henrard, 2003, p. 41), the goal for South Africa is not simply to end overt displays of racism but to create a society where a person’s race is no longer a successful indicator of his or her economic, social, or political privilege, but rather where every person is equally flourishing.

There is a tension within racial justice activism between not wanting to enforce apartheid race categories or encouraging racialised thinking, but at the same time holding on to the fact that in a historically extremely racist society and a context of institutionalised racism, bringing racial justice often means using those same categories.

However, it is worth asking—is the legacy of apartheid still impacting children’s access to quality education? Has this become only a matter of class, or are there still racial components to this inequality as well? Soudien’s (2012) book Realising the Dream: Unlearning the Logic of Race in the South African School looks at this question in-depth. Soudien (2012) points out that while South Africa on the whole does not perform well compared to other countries in terms of literacy and numeracy, these low figures can at times conceal “the persistent racial and class nature of educational performance in South Africa. At every level of education in the country, privileged white learners and students are performing considerably better than their counterparts of colour” (Soudien, 2012, p. 228). Individual students are sometimes able to rise above the social structure of which they are a part, but it is clear that while discrimination in the country is no longer only racial, given the degree to which the black middle class has entered former white schools (see, Soudien, 2004), the country’s racial experience continues to be determinative. This largely had to do with the Bantu Education system under apartheid, in which segregated schools were unfairly distributed resources (with white schools receiving most of the funds and black schools receiving the least), as well as a curriculum that was designed only to educate black learners at a minimum so they could be employed as unskilled labourers (Union of South Africa, 1953). While Soudien (2004) argues that social structure is not entirely determinative and youth do show agency in how they educate themselves given limited resources, overall, this work as well as other more recent research show that in South Africa the legacy of apartheid can still be seen in our educational structures and that former black schools continue to be disadvantaged (Erwin & Pillay, 2019). Many researchers (see for instance, Botha et al., 2012; Bhana & Pattman, 2010; Dolby, 2001) have also explored how race is navigated in these supposedly transformed educational spaces. However, these studies have served to highlight the ubiquity of race (and racism) with regard to the interactions between students themselves and students and their teachers.
Many South Africans speak positively about desiring national unity and reconciliation; however, they divorce the social, psychological, and interpersonal aspects of reconciliation from the material components. If reconciliation in South Africa can truly occur, the material injustices (such as unjust educational systems) brought about by racism need to be addressed. The Institute for Justice and Reconciliation has pointed out a need for “radical reconciliation” where material injustice is placed at the centre of reconciliation (Wale, 2013, p. 9). Therefore, this research focuses on those who are actively bringing reconciliation and countering South Africa’s racist history through systemic ways in education, rather than simply interpersonal dialogue.

4. Methodology
The research question of this study, which focuses on what motivates people to work against their “self-interests” in order to make a more racially just society, deals with a specific segment of the population (white people involved in racial justice in education). Thus, in keeping with many other biographical researchers who use network sampling methods, this study relied on snowball sampling. As researchers working in higher education and community development existing networks were used to identify two initial participants and one initial contact who referred other participants. These initial participants/contacts then suggested two or three other potential participants for the study. In total, eleven interviews were conducted, but only nine participants were used in the study. One participant asked to withdraw from the study in order to preserve her anonymity, and another participant was excluded because during the interview it was established that she did not fit the criteria of the study closely enough (the main thrust of her work was focused around individual orphans in a children’s village quite removed from the larger community and not directly related to education that is the focus of this study). The interviews were anonymous, so all names of institutions, people, and specific place names were changed, unless they were of a famous public figure. If it was easier to describe the person’s relationship rather than giving him or her a pseudonym, this was done (e.g., inserting “my brother” or “my husband” or “the principal” rather than a name). Those who participated in the study were involved in a range of education-related activities.

These participants self-identified as white when they confirmed they fit the criteria of the study. All the potential participants were emailed the letter of consent. In the same email a summary of the research topic was included and potential participants were specifically asked if they felt they fit the criteria of the study. The criteria included participants identifying as: a) white, b) a racial justice activist, and c) involved in education. Finding people involved broadly in the field in education was not difficult, as the initial contact had left the public educational sphere to work with up-skilling teachers in a township that was previously disadvantaged. Those who ended up participating were involved in a range of education-related activities, for example recently retired from the department of education and now assisting in creating free accessible curriculum and upskilling teachers in a predominantly black community (Julie); working in community development focused on education (Susan and Steven); lecturing at the university level around topics of peace and justice (Joe); running after-school education centres in rural KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) (Lewis); teaching at an education institute created to help early childhood teachers from previously disadvantaged groups gain skills they need to be good teachers (Jennifer); an academic who “seeks to reveal, whether in writing or in educational work, how race is operating, its destructive effects, and the positive results if we can find ways of breaking away from racial socialization” (Simon, in his own words), and teaching in a rural school (Hailey).

There were five women and four men who participated in this study. The participants ranged from 34 to 68 years in age, with the mode being 67, and the average 58.4, therefore the majority of the participants were born and raised during apartheid. All of the participants had English as their home language. This could be because of the demographics in KZN, where there are fewer Afrikaans speakers than in other provinces. Julie mentioned being a woman as the second most important part of her identity, and Simon mentioned being queer as an aspect of his; however, no
other participants mentioned sexuality or gender in their identification. Joe mentioned being an “internationalist” because of his upbringing in Australia. This study therefore did not focus on the role of gender or class in analyzing participants’ accounts of their activism.

Care was taken in how “racial justice activist” was defined. Firstly, “racial justice” was a specific choice. By using the word “justice” it deliberately links ideas of formal equality (the idea that everyone is equal before the law, and the law should be unbiased) with both substantive equality, i.e. the idea that context and differing circumstances created by historical processes need to be taken into account when trying to create a fair and just society (Henrard, 2003), as well as ideas of “radical reconciliation” that place economic injustice as central to ending racial discrimination and injustice (Wale, 2013, p. 9). Racial justice is conceptualised not only as not being personally prejudiced or racist, but as actively seeking to subvert and change structures and systems that privilege(d) white people. If reconciliation in South Africa can truly occur, the material injustices brought about by racism need to be addressed. Lastly, the term “justice” has a moral component by taking into consideration the way that moral obligation is created through metanarratives and how it motivates human action, thus using “racial justice” rather than “anti-racism” seemed appropriate.

Defining “activist” was more problematic. “Activist” generally summons ideas of protests, marches, strategic campaigns, and organizing people around causes. For scholars like Maxey (1999, p. 201) however, “activism means doing as much as I can from where I am at”. The focus is not particularly on a certain type of activity, but rather on doing whatever one can, in whatever context, to consciously further the aims of racial justice. While some of the participants shared that they did not initially think of themselves as activists, or even consciously stepped into their current work with firm ideas about racial equality, they do now see their work as an active part of creating a more just society.

All the participants were involved in work that directly and primarily affected people who were not of their same race, and all of their work was focused in some way on striving to improve the education of people whose lives were still deeply affected by the legacy of apartheid. Ethical clearance for this study was granted by the Human Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (protocol reference number HSS/0732/014 M).

A semi-structured interview format was used for this study, as it allowed for the flexibility needed to gain an understanding of the participants’ views. All participants signed an informed consent form, and it was explained to participants that they had the opportunity to withdraw from the study at any time. Seven of the nine interviews were done face to face, and the audio was digitally recorded. Two of the interviews were conducted by phone as the participants lived on hour inland from Pietermaritzburg and cost as well as time commitments precluded them from being interviewed in person. The phone interviews were also digitally recorded. After the interviews the audio recordings were transcribed verbatim. Before the interviews, all of the participants gave their express permission for the interviews to be recorded. The interview questions were based off of a prepared interview schedule that included questions on the participant’s upbringing and current work in racial justice and education, as well as questions relating to his or her identity and motivation for his or her work. This schedule served as a guide and was not adhered to strictly as for some participants it was possible to simply give a summary introduction of the topic, and the participant spoke without further questioning. Sometimes clarification was sought but as much as possible the idea was to allow the participant to share their stories from their perspective without interference.

5. Framework—Narrative identity

Smith (2003) argues that human action is not driven by pure self-interest or by pure altruism. Rather, it is driven by a sense of identity ("who we are") and morality ("how we ought to live") that springs from a larger metanarrative or story that explains core, non-negotiable truths about the
world and provides us with the framework for interpreting reality and deciding what to value and hold significant.

This framework was used to discover what “big story” or narrative undergirded the participants’ lives. Unpacking a large narrative is difficult, because it is the invisible structure that informs all the smaller stories and actions, the filter through which the participants’ stories are told. However, by looking for the effects—looking at how the participants identified themselves as well as what moral framework they held to strongly—a sense of the larger stories or narratives was pieced together.

Smith (2003) holds that people get a sense of morality from their narratives, which naturally focus around the sacred and the profane and provide individuals with a “moral ought.” Smith (2003, p. 10) uses this term to describe how narratives create normative duties, stating

when an action or order is moral, in this sense, it entails an imperative to affirm a commitment to shared rules or obligations that apply to people in certain defined situations and statuses. The moral also involves a sense of normative duty to express or perform obligations that are intrinsically motivated—because they are right, good, worthy, just and so on—rather than motivated by the end-desire of benefitting from a good or service.

Big narratives are also normative. They create and encode the social norms that guide individual decisions without conscious thought. Therefore, language that showed the participants were taking something for granted, as normal, or as part of the way everyone should live or think (for example, when participants said “obviously” or downplayed their actions as “normal”), it was deemed important in this study.

6. Results and discussion

In analysing the transcripts in this manner, three large narratives emerged as guiding the meaning and sense of self from most of the participants. The three big narratives are: 1. “People Are People”: The Humanist Narrative; 2. “Following God”: The Religious Narrative; and 3. “Quality Education for All”: The Educationalist Narrative.

These narratives are not mutually exclusive, however, and interact or overlap with one another. Most participants seemed to derive most of their actions and sense of self from one main story, but what was noticeable were certain identifiable nuances where two main stories overlapped in some of the responses of the participants, which have also been explored.

The following sections explore and define the three large narratives as well as the motivations that sprang out of these larger stories.

6.1. “People Are People”: The Humanist Narrative

This metanarrative is characterised by a strong belief in the equality of all human beings. In this story, no one is worth more than anyone else because of an external feature (such as skin colour, socio-economic class, or history); everyone has basic human rights that should be upheld. This concept is so central to one participant, Lewis, that he makes a point of explicitly “drilling” it into his young students:

**Lewis** And, and we’ve got to get people, people have got to get, still get those things off their eyes, and just see people as people . . . People, whatever colour, creed, or denomination, we, we all have the same things, we have desires, we have ambitions, we have feelings, we have—we feel happy, we feel sad, we all feel—it’s the same. It’s the same for all of us. So no we don’t, I don’t see myself as anything special, and I don’t see myself as anything different from anybody else. I say to the kids in my class and they’ll, they’ll tell you—I say, “Am I better than you?” And they’ll say, “No, sir!” And I’ll say “Am I more important than
you?” And they’ll say “No, sir!” because I’ve taught them that. I say to them we are all the same. God made us all the same.

Lewis invokes a moral basis for his views, the “ought,” when he says, “we’ve got to get people, people have got to get, still get those things off their eyes … ” His repetition and the manner in which he interrupts himself to make sure his point is clear shows how emphatic he is about this idea. Smith (2003) points out that strong emotions are often indicators of the sacred and the source of the moral centre in narratives. This focus on emotion springing from a violated moral code is echoed in Warren’s (2010) study of racial justice activists. As Jasper (as cited in Warren, 2010, p. 53) argues, “We become indignant (emotion) when we discover information (cognition) that violates our sense of right and wrong, thereby jeopardizing our system of meaning (morals)”.

Lewis then follows this up with examples that clarify what he means when he says, “people are people.” He points to human experiences, desires, and emotions that all humans share. He illustrates a story of how he enforces this thinking among his students (and even invites the listener to corroborate his story by asking the children themselves), by drilling his students in a People Are People catechism (“‘Am I better than you?’ ‘No, sir!’ ‘Am I more important that you?’ ‘No, sir!’”). With this illustration he shows how even someone in a position of authority (teacher) is equal to his students. Lewis does acknowledge that we have differences as humans but argues that these differences are not better or worse, nor a justifiable basis for treating others differently. Rather, they are simply differences.

The strength of the “People Are People” narrative is that it provides a strong foundation to combat the racist assumptions that there is something qualitatively and fundamentally different about people who are different races, as illustrated in this comment from Simon:

Simon You know we can de-deconstruct the sort of whiteness, because I think this idea, um, in the end, you know people are bodies. Right?

Simon, perhaps because he was an academic and had been exposed to different ways of thinking through a peer counselling course, was able to link this “People Are People” narrative to larger systems of injustice that oppress people. He spoke of oppressive systems (like racism) that rob both black and white people of their humanity and create situations where violence, injustice, and personal disconnection are the norm.

However, the tension within the “People Are People” narrative is that it privileges individual human rights (a right to education, to safety, to shelter), and therefore has the potential to highlight individual isolated incidents of injustice or immorality and be blind to larger systemic injustices that are creating the situation, as the following story illustrates:

Julie : … Something that made a huge impression on me. When I was about … nine or ten … those days there were pass laws, and people had to have their dompas [The Group Areas Act of 1953 required black people to carry an ID book (pass book or dompas) in order to work or stay overnight in a white area, or risk facing prosecution], and all of that, and the police van stopped outside our house, and they were really beating this man up. And my father went out and tried to calm the situation down, and when he came back in I remember he—I remember the whole thing was about “people are people.” It doesn’t matter about the colour of their skin that just happens to be your accident of birth.

This story reveals how Julie was informed from a young age that people have certain human rights that should not be denied (such as protection from violence), and these should not be based on an external feature such as skin colour. In this story, it is immoral to act violently towards another person, even if he or she has “broken the law” the fact remains they are still a person and should be treated as such. This incident enforced Julie’s idea that it is wrong to treat people badly
because of the colour of their skin. While the “People Are People” narrative has the potential to challenge instances of racism and racial privilege this story comes out as a strong condemnation of violence but does not question the morality of the pass law system.

The acknowledgement of difference by participants (not inherent, or essential, but created through social interactions and constructions) is something that can be glossed over by strong proponents of non-racialism who argue that focusing on difference ends up essentialising this difference, and this “plays into the hands of the hegemons” (Appiah, 1996: 55) and can prevent larger economic-based cross-racial changes. On the one hand, this type of language is perhaps being employed to emphasise individuality as well as common identities in order to bring a more united society, this thinking may carry tones of denial and a desire to avoid engaging with the messy complexities of both the historical and present meanings of whiteness (Steyn, 2001). In other words, while participants may reject racism, and ideas of racial superiority, there may be no engagement with white privilege which could possibly explain why these participants may not, for example, work specifically with white people directly challenging racism. However, Abrahams (2017, p. 13), indicates that “Commitments to undoing the effects of racism take many forms”, more so in South Africa where race is still a pivot around which society orbits, and as such everyday racism is still a growing concern, along with gross structural and economic inequalities. These “micro-interventions” therefore, according to Erwin (2017, p. 54), still lead to change.

Given the breadth and depth of the challenges faced in South Africa, these individual practical efforts cannot be used in isolation to fight against racism in South Africa, however as Spiropoulos as cited in Abrahams (2017, p. 10), argues, we should not be “too quick to dismiss the small positives if they don’t fit into an overall fix.” Bonnett (2000, p. 100) states that initiatives aimed at social justice “… may best be effected on the level of consciousness: that to change how people feel about others and themselves is tantamount to changing society”. While the participants in this study reveal an acute awareness of the community in which they work and have done significant “on the ground grassroots work” which allows them to contribute positively to change, it would however be beneficial for white activists to do “… deeper self-work by examining their privilege, their fragility, and the gaps in their misunderstandings of structural racism more thoroughly” (Gorski & Erakat, 2019, p. 794).

6.2. “Following God”: The Religious (Christian) Narrative

All the participants who chose to participate in the study had some form of connection to Christianity. Either their parents identified as Christian or the participants themselves identified as members of some variation of the Christian religion. Therefore, while this type of thinking might apply a broader context (someone of any religion may get his or her sense of identity and morality from a religious narrative), in the context of this study the religious narrative was an explicitly Christian narrative and the nuances of this narrative are specific to the Christian religion. It should be noted that Christianity is one of the three larger narratives that inform participants’ behaviour and their ideas about anti-racism, and not the only narrative.

In the following excerpt, Susan explains why she stays involved in her racial justice education work, despite challenges, by emphasizing the role that her understanding of who God is plays in her life:

Susan  But for me my faith obviously is the number one determining factor in all of this. Because I believe that justice is something that God cares about, and so, uh, I mean that’s just, that’s at the very core of everything.

Here her language “of course” and “obviously” show the normative element in this narrative. She emphasises it by calling her faith “the number one determining factor” in everything she does, and her justification for why she is involved in this work relates to her understanding of who God is. She sees him as a God who cares about justice. The implication in this is that because she sees her God
in this way, she wants/needs to/should act in this way. The moral impulse to act comes from her understanding of God’s character.

In his explanation of his initial involvement in racial justice work, Steven explains the tension he felt between the ideal values given to him by his faith tradition (an idea of living selflessly like Jesus) and his own reality of living a comfortable, self-centred life.

Steven  I suppose that was probably the main catalyst to me realizing that it is my responsibility to do, to be a part of, of, changing the situations that exist, bringing justice, is [I] suppose, was the word we used a lot. And um, and not living for myself, but actually living for the outsider and the oppressed. Um, and that would be the way Jesus does things.

He clarifies this idea by saying,

Steven  If I really believed in this Jesus that I do … I would be following in his footsteps and I would be involved in this kind of things.

Here again we see the moral power of narratives in giving individuals an organizing principle of what is the good, the true, and the just that one should strive for, even if one is not doing so currently (Smith, 2003). Steven’s excerpt illustrates his idea that he should live a certain way, and his point of reference for how he should live comes from his guiding narrative, which centres around the life of Jesus.

The Christian narrative provides a very strong organizing system for right and wrong, good and bad, just and unjust. Since it is based in a transcendent source, it is a powerful external authority for those who embrace it and can dramatically shape individuals’ actions. However, one can see there are nuances in the manner of interpretation of this narrative, and that is then played out in the way individuals both act and articulate their action. Steven’s version of this narrative seems to emphasise the person of Jesus as the central organizing principle. Steven looks at the life of Jesus and asks himself, “Am I living in a similar, manner?” whereas Susan’s version seems to focus more on absolute principles of right and wrong, justice and injustice found in God’s character and explained in Christian scriptures. For example, before discussing how God cares about justice, Susan mentioned feeling worn out at times in working to bring more equality in the education system (through giving teachers access to better curriculum and resources and giving them opportunities to improve their skills and values). She says,

Susan  You feel like you constantly, you’re fighting a massive system and you trying, well, live, or work or whatever, anti that system, and, I guess, in any environment where you are swimming upstream, it’s, that’s tiring. So, that’s challenging. Um, but I don’t suppose justice was ever meant to be easy because, that’s why we have injustice! [laughs] It’s going to be easy if you go that way.

Susan’s justification for continuing to swim upstream even when it is tiring is because of her understanding that she is doing the right thing—what God requires of her.

The “Following God” narrative has the potential to challenge racism and injustice, but again, its transformational power is linked to the way it is interpreted. While Steven and Susan, seem convinced that God wants them to do this work, the previous apartheid regime also used the Christian narrative to justify its actions. The participants argue that bringing racial equality is part of the purpose God has given them in the world; however, historically many white people (for example, colonisers and the proponents of the apartheid regime) conceived of their purpose in an opposite fashion. The gnostic dichotomous thinking of good versus evil and light versus dark fed into European ideas of civilised and savage as well as heathen and Christian (Steyn, 2001). This
way of thinking cast white people in a saviour role, sent with a divine mission to civilise and Christianise Africa. This thinking also allowed white people to be cast as the norm and black people as deviant, even evil, and undergirded much of the rationalization for apartheid laws of segregation and oppression (Steyn, 2001).

On one level, this explanation is a powerful critique of paternalistic narratives that see poor (and in this case poor black) people as needing a white saviour to step in and save them. In this explanation, all people are constructed as equally flawed and equally gifted. While this narrative’s strength is that it minimizes superficial differences, its weakness is that it may be blind to larger structural inequalities that cause these differences.

6.3. “Quality Education for All”: The Educationalist Narrative
Since this research focused particularly on the sphere of education, it is not surprising that almost all the participants had very strong views on the importance of education. However, this was not seen as simply an aspect of treating everyone in an equal, humane manner. Decisions about what is right or good and who we are as humans were dictated by the understanding that education is key (perhaps the key) to what makes us who we are. In this narrative, “good” is defined as giving someone access to quality education, and “evil” is defined as denying people that education. Many of the participants gave examples of people (both in the past and in the present) being denied quality education. The vehemence with which they told these stories and their obvious disgust for those denying education show the moral heart of the “Quality Education for All” narrative.

For example, few participants brought up the many aspects of apartheid injustices, but almost all the participants voluntarily singled out Bantu Education as one of the most unjust aspects of apartheid, as this comment from Jane shows:

Jane  Bantu Education was wicked. [pause] Um, uh … there’s just nothing else to say.

In the “Quality Education for All” narrative, poor education is considered evil. Field notes taken during the interview process showed that when Jane made this statement, she made it quietly and with force, implying that there is nothing that can be said, because Bantu Education was unspoken wicked. Furthermore, she uses “wicked” rather than “wrong,” which is a stronger moral condemnation.

This narrative places specific emphasis on the rights of children, and particularly the right of children to a good education. When it comes to children (who are dependent on others providing most things for them) and education (which something that one cannot self-create, and has long-term repercussions for the rest of one’s life) many of the participants expressed a moral indignation over the fact that children were not receiving a good education. In this narrative, both a lack of providing decent education in the past, but more pressingly, a lack of decent education at present, was seen as one of the ultimate evils.

Jennifer To try and start getting things right so these little children have got a chance in life. It’s it’s, it’s, ja, we’ve got to start with the children … And we never going to get, get our children to think and to critically evaluate what is what is going on in 80% of our schools … And if we, we’re not going to address it at the bottom it’s pointless putting sticky tape at the top. Trying to patch matric, because it’s not going to work.

Here, Jennifer is arguing for the urgency educators have to make sure that children get a good education, since it impacts the rest of their lives. Her black and white language around this issue (“we’re never going to get” and “it’s pointless”) show her firm belief in the importance of educating children, and the normative power of this narrative in her life.
Hailey  I mean you’re fighting people who, who really don’t, I suppose, don’t have the passion and really care, um about the children. It’s not about the children; it’s about trying to impress the trying to look good in the eyes of the public and the eyes of the world and whatever.

In the above quote, Hailey, reveals the moral indignation she feels when one of her central beliefs about what is good (educating children) is violated by others in the Education Department. Her tone in the interview is one of intense frustration over those who are not putting the children at the centre of their work.

One of the characteristics of this narrative is that for those who identify with it, it has the potential to take a paternalistic stance towards others. Since it is focused around uneducated children, the participants who hold to this narrative are constructed as being in a superior position (their status as both adults and as trained educators) puts the work being done because of this narrative in a hierarchical frame. Warren (2010) however puts forward the concept of a “moral shock” as motivating or sparking people into activism. While none of these narratives had a specific “shocking” experience, several of them shared how their emotions were stirred when they saw the difference between their strongly held ideals about education and humanity, and the poverty, injustice and inhumanity that happened during apartheid and continues in our poor education system today. In all of these cases, the participants did not blame people for their poverty or lack of education but rather were able to acknowledge the circumstances that had created this situation, and they were compelled to act to put an end to these kinds of situations.

One of the unique characteristics of the South African experience is that while white South Africans held political power, and continue to hold economic power, they have always been a numerical minority. While segregation policies such as the Group Areas Act (1950) and the creation of Bantustans, as well as the Reservation Separate Amenities Act (1953) meant that apartheid was structured to keep white people isolated, the potential for contact with black people, and the opportunities to witness racial injustice were more prevalent than in the USA where black people are a minority. However, another consequence of this characteristic is that when the white political power structure crumbled, government positions (such as teaching) began to be managed by black people, creating many more opportunities for cross-racial interactions, friendships and experiences than the majority of white people in the USA had access to. When the government changed in 1994 and the different Education Departments (established for the different race groups), amalgamated many of the participants “found themselves” in positions where they were compelled to interact with mostly black people (either as their students, or as their supervisors). Educators had to choose whether to stay in these positions or make the choice to retreat further into white enclaves. Here we see the interplay between the system and personal choice. When by choosing to stay in public education with black students, co-workers and supervisors, if the participants had been unaware of injustice previously under apartheid, they were very quickly made aware through their interactions with people and schools.

Whether it was suddenly teaching black students for the first time and becoming aware of her own prejudice and some of the realities faced by poverty-stricken black people (Jane, Jennifer), or being handed a Peace Studies programme and finding out it was his calling (Joe), or staying in a job for the pay (Julie and Hailey), many of the participants had stories of “stumbling into” education work that had a more activist nature, rather than making a deliberate choice. As they witnessed first-hand the destruction that apartheid had brought, they were motivated to work towards restoring it. As Jennifer says:

Jennifer  Oh, oh it’s just grown, as I’ve just seen more and more, and more and more sad and horrified. And more determined to do, to do even more.
This emotion and determination to act to end racial injustice in education ties in with Warren's (2010) ideas about activism springing from the sense that a moral system has been violated. While those who participated in the US studies generally experienced these moral shocks in isolated, or direct instances, for the participants in this study, the moral shocks came through a growing, gradual awareness of injustice. This gradual awareness of injustice is similar to Louw-Potgieter's (1988) exploration of the journeys of Afrikaner dissidents. Presently, the majority of participants are no longer working for the government, but are retired and doing volunteer teacher-training, assessment, and educational support programmes to continue bringing justice in the field of education, advocating for children in communities that were previously disadvantaged and continue to be disadvantaged in the current system. As Lewis, who is formally retired from public education but now runs an after-school education centre in rural KwaZulu-Natal very passionately put it:

**Lewis** Twenty years after democracy rural education in general is unjust. It is still below standard … So really it’s just the calling to fight injustice, and education is our playing field … this rural situation that we work in—children who walk to school, who come from child-headed homes, who live with Gogo (Grandmother) … Some of them travel forty kilometers to school in a day. I mean we have kids who come to the centre who have an extra eight kilometers on to their travels twice a week. And, so … there are many, many mitigating circumstances that some of the schools, that are supposedly schools, are still in horrendous conditions and the infrastructures are impossible. Their choice to stay in the field of education and work for justice there points to the fact that even when it was a job for a pay-check, there was possibly still an “activist” component to their work as well.

7. Conclusion

Smith (2003) argues that an understanding of individual's larger guiding narratives and personal narratives uncovers an individual's moral framework that prompts his or her social action. In this sense, humans exhibit agency but within the framework of a moral system. This does not mean that people only act out of a sense of duty. Somers (1997), Warren (2010), and Smith (2003) also clearly argue that it is people's sense of who they are (e.g., as Christians, teachers, or caring people) that motivates their actions, but this sense of who they are is embedded in larger narratives that encompass moral orders.

This article has explored the “big stories” or narratives that undergird both the participants' identities and the moral framework from which they act. The big stories of People Are People, Following God, and Quality Education for All, as well as the various nuances produced when these narratives overlapped, seem to have provided a sense of identity and moral framework which prompt and motivate these participants to be involved in education work that is aimed at bringing a more racially just society. These participants see themselves as educators, as Christians, and as caring people, and these identities spur action grounded from a moral framework. As Warren (2010, p. 20) says, activism for many social activists “does not represent a denial of self but rather a way to define the self as a moral actor.”

The main strength of this study lies in the adoption of the narrative identity framework that informed the study and resulted in the unearthing of these “big stories” or narratives that reveal a definite move away from overt prejudice and is a sincere attempt to positively engage with the “new South Africa” by finding common ground through aspects of shared identities; however, by not engaging with race at all, it may be a way to avoid the guilt of continued racial privilege. As Abrahams (2017, p. 10) notes though, “Practical responses to racism remain the most common
and accessible mechanisms through which people fight against racism, either through individual or organisational activities”.

The limitations of this study were threefold. The field of education was specifically used to narrow the scope of this project and also to make a double contribution to whiteness studies as well as to the field of education. However, the results may have varied had the criteria been expanded to include more political activists, those involved in the criminal justice system, or grass-roots organisers (for instance). It may be that white people in those contexts are better able to critically engage with their whiteness and are constructing their identities along different lines. This study was also limited in that it only focused on English-speaking, white South Africans in the Durban/Pietermaritzburg area. A broader study that includes a larger geographic area, as well as Afrikaans participants, would show if these findings are true for the majority of white South African racial justice activists, or only this small set. In addition to this, whiteness studies has been critiqued as a new way of centralizing the white voice, and white people have been challenged to “stop talking” in order to allow people of other races play a central role in conversations on race (MacMullan, 2009). While we agree that this is a potential pitfall of whiteness studies, this study highlights that perhaps helping white South Africans move from a denial of racial privilege and a discomfort with critically engaging whiteness, will require not less white people talking but more. However while white voices in anti-racism initiatives need to be heard, this should not be at the expense of marginalizing the lived experiences of black people. In this regard we acknowledge that further research in this area should also include black voices. A limitation of this particular study then due to its scope and nature has been the exclusion of the perspective of black learners. Further research will show whether these findings can apply to white South Africans in other contexts beyond just education. It may be that activists involved in other fields exhibit a much greater conscious choice to be involved in work that benefits those of other races and are therefore more aware of how their whiteness impacts their identities.

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