

THE INTERIOR ARCHITECTURE OF TRANSFORMATION

Misdirected Agency

When your good intentions operate in someone else's territory

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CONTENTS

Introduction	Mrs. Patterson's Letter
Chapter 1	The Helping Trap
Chapter 2	Habitus and the Invisible Hand
Chapter 3	Whiteness-as-Property
Chapter 4	White Emotional Trespass
Chapter 5	Self-Efficacy and the Service Trap
Chapter 6	The Mirror Question
Chapter 7	What Repair Requires
Chapter 8	When Institutions Protect Themselves
	Serving Without Consuming

INTRODUCTION

Mrs. Patterson's Letter

The hallway outside my office had that particular quality of winter light that makes everything in a school building look both institutional and fragile. January in the Twin Cities metro. The kind of cold that announces itself before you open the door, that seeps through the weather stripping and settles into the carpet tiles. Someone had taped a hand-drawn welcome sign to the wall across from my door, a student's work, purple marker on yellow construction paper, the letters careful and slightly uneven. It had been there since September. I noticed it that morning the way you notice something that has been invisible for months: suddenly, as if it had just appeared.

Mrs. Patterson knocked twice, which was unusual. Most staff either knocked once and walked in or stood in the doorway waiting to be acknowledged. The double knock was courteous in a way that suggested she had thought about this visit, that she had prepared for it, that whatever she was carrying was not casual.

She was carrying a manila folder.

I should describe Mrs. Patterson, or rather, the composite I am calling Mrs. Patterson, because the specificity matters even though the person is fictional. She was in her late fifties, a veteran of the building in the way that some teachers become synonymous with the school itself. Fourteen years in the district. The kind of teacher who kept granola bars in her desk drawer, not because she had read about food insecurity at a workshop but because she had noticed, years ago, that some of her students arrived hungry, and she was not the type to fill out a form about it. She just bought granola bars. Every week. Her own money. She remembered birthdays. She wrote notes to families in her small, precise handwriting, notes that said things like *I want you to know that your child made me laugh today*, and she mailed them, actually mailed them, because she believed that a physical letter carries weight that an email does not.

She set the manila folder on my desk the way you set down something you are proud of. She squared the edges. She smoothed a wrinkle that was not there.

"I want you to look at this," she said. "Before I send it."

Inside the folder: three pages, typed, single-spaced. Written on district letterhead she had found in the copy room. The letter was addressed to Immigration and Customs Enforcement. It was eloquent, actually. She had spent time on it. You could see the care in the sentence construction, the way she had anticipated counterarguments and addressed them, the way she had avoided inflammatory language while still making her position clear. She wanted to tell ICE that our schools were safe spaces for all children regardless of family documentation status. She wanted to tell them that enforcement actions near school property would traumatize students and violate the implicit trust that families placed in public institutions. She wanted to tell them that we, the adults in this building, would not be complicit in the targeting of children.

She wanted my approval to send it.

"I'm trying to protect our kids," she said.

She was. Her care was operating at full volume, genuine and warm and urgent, while her thinking about what the letter would actually produce in the world was running on a separate track entirely, one she had not consulted because the intensity of the care felt like sufficient analysis.

And the letter, if sent, could have compromised active legal cases that families in our district were pursuing with pro bono attorneys. It could have violated district communication protocols that existed precisely to prevent individual staff members from creating ad hoc relationships with federal enforcement agencies. It could have, and almost certainly would have, created exactly the kind of adversarial dynamic with ICE that our legal counsel was working to prevent, the kind of dynamic that turns an institutional relationship into a personal one, where federal agents remember a name attached to a building and decide that building deserves closer attention.

Mrs. Patterson's care was genuine. Her action, if completed, would have put families at risk.

I sat with the folder between us on my desk, and I felt the weight of what I was about to do, which was tell a beloved teacher that her act of courage was actually an act of potential harm. The fluorescent light above us hummed. The hallway outside was quiet in the way school hallways are quiet during second period, a held breath between the chaos of passing time. Mrs. Patterson watched me read. She had her hands folded in her lap, and I noticed that she had dressed more carefully than usual, as if the letter required a particular version of herself to deliver it. A blazer over her usual cardigan. Small earrings she did not normally wear.

She had rehearsed this. She believed in it.

I felt, too, the inadequacy of my position. Because she was not entirely wrong. The district's response to the immigration enforcement actions of January 2026 was coordinated, yes. Legally sound, yes. But was it sufficient? Were we doing enough? Were the protocols we had built, the careful language, the chain-of-command structures, the legal review processes, actually protecting families, or were they protecting the institution from the discomfort of taking a more visible stand? Were we, in our caution, serving the students Mrs. Patterson loved, or were we serving our own institutional survival?

I did not know the answer to that question then. I am not certain I know it now. And that uncertainty is not a rhetorical gesture. It is the thing that keeps me honest when I am tempted to make this framework cleaner than it deserves to be.

I have been Mrs. Patterson. More than once.

I have been the person whose urgency exceeded my role, whose conviction that *something must be done* outpaced any careful assessment of what that something should actually be. I have drafted emails at eleven at night, righteous and certain, that would have caused real damage if I had hit send before morning. I have taken actions I believed were necessary and that my supervisors experienced as insubordination. I have felt the specific intoxication of acting while others hesitated, the moral certainty that doing something, anything, is always better than doing nothing.

I was wrong about that. Not about the feeling, which was real, but about the conclusion I drew from it. The feeling of urgency is information. It tells you something about your emotional state, your values, the intensity of your connection to the crisis at hand. What it does not tell you is what to do. And treating urgency as a guide to action, treating the *feeling* of rightness as evidence that an action *is* right, is one of the most dangerous conflation I know.

This is not an abstract concern for me. I have watched it happen in other people, yes, but I have also caught it happening in myself, and the catching came too late more often than I would like to admit. There was a year, early in my career, when I was working in a district that was navigating a curriculum controversy. I won't name the district or the controversy because this is not a story about them; it is a story about me. I was

certain, in the way that young leaders are certain, that the district's approach was too cautious. I was certain that the families deserved more transparency. I was certain that my analysis was correct and that the people above me in the organizational chart were wrong, not just strategically wrong but morally wrong, and that moral wrongness gave me permission to act outside my role.

I don't remember exactly what I did. I remember the feeling. I remember the righteousness. I remember the sense that history would vindicate me, that the people I was working around would eventually see that I had been right all along. What I did not see, because my urgency had blinded me to it, was the cost my actions imposed on people who were not me. The families I was trying to serve experienced confusion when the district's messaging became inconsistent. My colleagues, some of whom agreed with me substantively, found themselves managing fallout from my unilateral decisions. The trust that makes organizational coordination possible, the trust that allows people to stay in their roles because they believe the system is working, eroded a little because I had decided that my judgment mattered more than the system's capacity to respond.

I tell you this because the framework I am about to spend an entire book developing is not something I built from the outside. I built it from the inside, from the experience of being the problem I was trying to solve.

This book is about a pattern. I call the pattern *misdirected agency*, and I want to describe it before I define it, because the description matters more than the definition at this stage.

Here is what the pattern looks like from the outside. A community faces an external threat. Immigration enforcement, a school shooting, a racial incident, a pandemic. Inside the school, staff who care deeply about their students experience overwhelming emotional activation. They are distressed. They are angry. They feel helpless. And because they are competent people, people who are accustomed to solving problems, who have been trained and socialized and rewarded for solving problems, they reach for action.

The problem is not the feeling. The feeling is appropriate. The problem is not even the reaching for action, which is a natural response to distress. The problem is where the action goes.

A teacher organizes a political action meeting during instructional time. A counselor makes promises to a family about legal protections she cannot guarantee. An administrator contacts media without consulting anyone in the district office. A staff member stations herself outside the school building as a "visible ally" without asking whether her visibility serves the students or her own need to feel useful. A veteran educator drafts a letter to ICE on district letterhead.

None of these people are bad. All of them care. And every one of these actions creates unpredictability in an environment where the students, the actual people these actions are supposed to serve, need consistency most.

That is the pattern. High emotional activation channeled into intervention that undermines the stability students need. Care that becomes, in its execution, a form of harm. Helping that costs the people it claims to help.

I want to be careful here, and I will keep being careful about this throughout the book, because there is a version of this framework that is dangerous. If a superintendent reads this and thinks, "I have language now to tell my staff to sit down and shut up," the framework has been weaponized. That is not what I am offering. What I am offering is a mirror.

The mirror matters because of what is underneath the pattern. This is not a book about behavior management for adults, about teaching teachers to stay in their lane, about imposing organizational discipline on passionate people. Or rather, it touches on all of those things, but none of them is the point.

The point is what produces the pattern. And what produces it is not impulsiveness or insubordination or lack of professionalism, though those are the labels institutions tend to reach for. What produces it is a set of forces operating beneath conscious awareness that make misdirected agency feel, to the person enacting it, like exactly the right thing to do. The actions feel righteous. That is the word I keep coming back to. They feel morally certain. And that feeling of moral certainty is itself the problem, because you cannot easily question an action that feels like it comes from the deepest and best part of who you are.

This book examines those forces. It does so through several theoretical lenses, and I want to preview them here so you know where we are going.

The first is *habitus*, a concept from the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu that describes the accumulated weight of your socialization, the durable dispositions that make certain responses feel automatic, natural, obvious.¹ *Habitus* explains why misdirected agency feels righteous. Your socialization in the educational field, particularly if you are white, has produced in you a set of dispositions toward individual heroism, visible helping, emotional expression as proof of caring. Those dispositions were not chosen. They were formed. And during crisis, they activate before conscious thought can catch up.

The second is *whiteness-as-property*, drawn from the legal scholarship of Cheryl Harris, who argued that whiteness functions as actual property in American society, carrying rights of use, disposition, and exclusion.² This framework explains something that *habitus* alone cannot: why misdirected agency so often involves the assumption that one has the *right* to act in any space, to represent any institution, to occupy any room with one's feelings. That assumption is not personality. It is property.

The third is *self-efficacy*, Albert Bandura's construct describing your confidence in your ability to accomplish specific tasks in specific domains.³ *Self-efficacy* is domain-specific, which means that a teacher who has high confidence in classroom instruction does not automatically have high confidence in crisis

intervention or legal advocacy. When crisis disrupts the domain where you hold competence, a gap opens between your emotional activation and your actual capacity, and that gap produces compensatory action: doing what you are good at in a context where what you are good at does not apply.

And the fourth is the mirror question, which is the operational center of the entire framework. The mirror question asks: *Is my action right now serving the people I am trying to serve, or is it serving my need to feel like I am doing something?*

Simple to ask. Devastating to answer honestly. And the devastation is the point, because the honesty is where the work actually lives.

I need to say something about the crisis context, because this framework did not emerge in the abstract. It emerged in January 2026, when immigration enforcement actions in the Minneapolis-St. Paul metropolitan area created a specific kind of fear in school communities serving immigrant families. The fear was not hypothetical. It had a texture and a weight that anyone who was in those buildings during those weeks would recognize. Attendance dropped. Families who had never missed a parent-teacher conference stopped responding to phone calls. Students were arriving distracted, tearful, unable to concentrate; some of them sat in class with their coats on, as if they might need to leave suddenly. Teachers were hearing things in hallways and classrooms that they had never heard before, children asking whether their parents would be home when they returned, children asking whether the school was safe, children asking questions that no adult in the building had adequate answers for.

The adults in the building were not okay either. Staff meetings took on a quality of barely contained distress. People cried in the copy room. People argued in parking lots. People who had worked together for years found themselves suddenly divided along lines they had not known existed, between those who wanted to act publicly and those who believed the institution needed to hold steady, between those whose families were directly threatened and those whose distress, while genuine, was rooted in solidarity rather than shared vulnerability.

I am not going to name my district. The vignettes in this book are fictional composites, built from patterns observed across multiple contexts. But the crisis context is real, and the patterns I describe were specific to that context in ways that matter. The emotional activation of staff during the January enforcement actions was not generic crisis response. It was shaped by the racial dynamics of the moment: white staff members experiencing distress on behalf of students of color, reaching for action rooted in dispositions formed through white socialization, exercising what they experienced as courage but what the framework would identify as the deployment of property rights they did not know they owned.

I am trying to be honest rather than comfortable here. The pattern I observed most frequently and most consequentially was enacted by white staff members. That does not mean misdirected agency is exclusively a

white phenomenon. Any leader whose socialization in the educational field has produced the disposition toward individual heroism over communal accountability can enact it. A Black principal who grew up learning to survive in predominantly white institutions may have developed dispositions that mirror white helper patterns in form while differing in origin. The mirror work applies to everyone.

But naming the racial specificity matters, even when it is uncomfortable, because the racial specificity explains something that race-neutral analysis cannot. It explains why certain staff members felt entitled to act unilaterally. It explains why certain forms of helping carried an assumption of access that other forms did not. It explains why the letter Mrs. Patterson brought to my office was, among other things, an exercise of property rights she did not know she owned: the right to represent the district without authorization, the right to insert herself into a federal process affecting families whose vulnerability she understood abstractly but did not share, the right to feel so certain of her care that she did not need to consult the people she was caring for.

A tangent, and then I will come back. I taught a graduate seminar once where a student, a white woman who was an assistant principal in a suburban district, said something I have thought about many times since. We were discussing Bourdieu, and she was frustrated, visibly frustrated, and she said: "So you're telling me that my desire to help is actually a problem. That the thing I thought was my best quality is something I need to examine."

I paused for too long before answering, because I was trying to figure out how to say yes without making it sound like an accusation. What I said was something like: "I'm saying that the desire to help is real and good and also that it operates inside a structure that shapes what helping looks like, who gets to do it, whose needs get centered, and whose get displaced. The desire is not the problem. The structure the desire operates inside is the problem. But the structure operates *through* the desire, which means examining the desire is part of examining the structure."

She did not look satisfied. I was not satisfied either. The formulation was too clean, too academic. What I was really trying to say, and what I think I can say more plainly now after years of sitting with it, is this: the impulse to help is beautiful when it is grounded in relationship, accountability, and actual competence in the domain where help is needed. The same impulse, separated from those things, becomes rescue. And rescue has a cost that is always paid by someone other than the rescuer.

I don't think she heard it that night. I think she might hear it now. Or maybe not. This work does not resolve on anyone else's timeline.

What I do know is that the question she asked, "So my desire to help is the problem?", is the question this entire book is built to answer. Not with a yes. Not with a no. With a longer, more uncomfortable conversation about what desire means when it operates inside a history you did not choose but cannot opt out of, what helping means when the people you are trying to help have not asked for your particular form of it, and what it

costs when you reach for action before you have done the slower, harder work of asking whether your action is yours to take.

Here is what this book will do.

Chapter 1 examines what I call the helping trap: the way educational culture cultivates and rewards a specific identity, the helper, and how that identity becomes the mechanism through which misdirected agency operates. Chapter 2 takes up Bourdieu's habitus in depth, tracing how dispositions toward individual heroism form below consciousness and activate during crisis. Chapter 3 is the hardest chapter in the book, and possibly the hardest chapter in this entire series. It examines Cheryl Harris's whiteness-as-property framework and applies it to the dynamics of white helping in schools. I wrote that chapter cold, which means I wrote it without warmth, without invitation, without the collegial "we" that characterizes most of this book. It is clinical and relentless and it does not offer the reader comfort, because the content does not deserve comfort.

Chapter 4 introduces the concept of white emotional trespass and examines how whiteness-as-property authorizes the occupation of emotional space during crisis. Chapter 5 maps the self-efficacy mechanisms, the domain-specificity problem, the compensatory action pattern, the way existing competence gets deployed in contexts where it does not apply. Chapter 6 is the mirror question chapter, and it is the warmest chapter in the book, because it shows the practice working: three practitioners asking the mirror question in different contexts, with different results, none of them clean.

Chapter 7 asks what repair requires after misdirected agency has been enacted. It is written from a place of genuine uncertainty, because I am not confident that I know the answer. Chapter 8 examines institutional complicity, the way organizations protect themselves by framing staff boundary violations as individual problems rather than examining the organizational conditions that produce them. And the conclusion returns to first person, to my own experience, to the ongoing question of whether naming these patterns is sufficient to interrupt them.

I want to be explicit about one more thing before we begin. This book is mirror work. It is not a diagnostic tool. The moment you read this framework and think, "I know someone who does this," you have missed the point. The framework's first application is always to the self. Always. If it does not land there first, it will land somewhere harmful.

I have watched frameworks get weaponized. I have watched the language of equity get used to silence dissent, the language of trauma get used to pathologize resistance, the language of professionalism get used to enforce compliance with systems that deserve to be challenged. I built this framework as a mirror. I cannot prevent someone from using it as a hammer. But I can be clear, from the first page, about what it is for.

CHAPTER 1

The Helping Trap

The most dangerous thing a well-intentioned person can do in a crisis is act on that intention without examining the structure of their own desire to help. This is not a popular argument in education, where helping is regarded as the profession's defining act, its moral signature, the thing that separates those who teach from those who merely work. But the argument is necessary because the pattern of misdirected agency, the phenomenon at the center of this book, cannot be understood without first reckoning with how thoroughly the educational field cultivates a disposition toward action that feels righteous precisely because it has never been interrogated. The helping trap is not a failure of character. It is a success of socialization.

To make this case requires two theoretical frameworks that do not sit comfortably together: Shane Safir and Jamila Dugan's model of agency as an integrated construct, and Pierre Bourdieu's theory of habitus as a set of durable, transposable dispositions that operate below the threshold of conscious deliberation.¹ The first framework offers a way to name what goes wrong when agency is exercised in fragmentary form. The second offers a way to explain why that fragmentation persists even among people who sincerely want to do better. Together, they describe a mechanism that is simultaneously structural and personal, produced by institutions and enacted by individuals, resistant to the very forms of reflection most commonly prescribed as its remedy.

Agency as an Integrated Construct

Safir and Dugan's framework, developed in *Street Data* and elaborated in their subsequent work on equity-centered transformation, identifies four dimensions of authentic agency: identity, belonging, mastery, and efficacy.² These are not a menu from which practitioners select. They are an ecology. Identity refers to the capacity to act from a grounded sense of who one is, including the social positions one occupies and the histories those positions carry. Belonging describes the experience of being held within a community whose recognition is not contingent on performing a particular version of oneself. Mastery involves the disciplined acquisition of skill and knowledge over time, the slow accumulation of competence that permits increasingly sophisticated action. And efficacy, the dimension most familiar to educators steeped in Bandura's foundational work, refers to the belief that one's actions can produce meaningful outcomes in the world.³

What makes Safir and Dugan's framework generative for the analysis of crisis response is their insistence that these four dimensions function as a system. When all four are integrated, a person acts from identity (knowing who they are and what positions they occupy), within belonging (connected to a community that holds them accountable), through mastery (possessing the skill and knowledge the situation requires), toward efficacy (believing their action can matter). This integrated form of agency is what makes it possible for someone to encounter a crisis, feel the pull to respond, and still pause long enough to ask whether their response serves the people in front of them or the story they are telling themselves about who they are.

The problem, and this is the central argument of the book, is that the educational field systematically cultivates one dimension of agency while allowing the other three to atrophy. That dimension is efficacy.

Efficacy, divorced from identity, becomes performance. The person who acts without a grounded sense of their own social position, their racial identity, their class location, their relationship to the community they are ostensibly serving, is not exercising agency. They are executing a script. The script may be elaborate. It may involve sacrifice. It may produce genuine short-term relief for the people on the receiving end. But it is a script nonetheless, written by a set of cultural assumptions about who helps and who is helped that the actor has never had to examine because the assumptions feel like instinct.⁴

Efficacy, divorced from belonging, becomes rescue. The person who acts without meaningful connection to the community they are entering, who parachutes into a crisis with resources and energy but without relationships, without accountability to the people most affected, without the reciprocal vulnerability that belonging requires, is enacting a particular kind of power. They are the protagonist of someone else's story. Matthew Hughey's analysis of the white savior narrative in American film and culture is instructive here, not because every instance of misdirected agency replicates the Hollywood version, but because the underlying structure is the same: an outsider whose moral transformation is

the real subject of the narrative, with the crisis and its victims serving as the setting for that transformation rather than as the center of the story.⁵

Efficacy, divorced from mastery, becomes recklessness. The person who acts without the disciplined knowledge that the situation demands, who substitutes intensity of feeling for depth of preparation, who believes that caring enough is the same as knowing enough, is dangerous in ways that sincerity cannot mitigate. This is perhaps the most counterintuitive of the three fragmentations because American culture in general, and educational culture in particular, treats passion as a form of competence. The teacher who stays late, who spends their own money on supplies, who "does whatever it takes" is celebrated in a professional culture that has confused self-sacrifice with skill.⁶

I want to be precise about what I am claiming and what I am not. I am not arguing that efficacy is inherently problematic, or that the belief in one's capacity to make a difference is somehow suspect. Bandura's research on self-efficacy remains one of the most robust findings in the psychological literature, and his distinction between efficacy expectations (the belief that one can perform a given behavior) and outcome expectations (the belief that a given behavior will produce a given outcome) is essential for understanding how people sustain effort in difficult circumstances.⁷ What I am arguing is that efficacy, separated from the other three dimensions of Safir and Dugan's framework, produces a characteristic pattern of action that looks like agency but functions as something else. It functions as the reproduction of existing power relations under the guise of moral urgency.

The Mechanism: Bourdieu's Habitus

If Safir and Dugan help us name what misdirected agency looks like, Bourdieu helps us understand why it persists. His concept of habitus, developed across decades of empirical and theoretical work, describes the system of durable, transposable dispositions that individuals acquire through their immersion in particular social fields.⁸ Habitus is not a set of rules that people consciously follow. It is a set of generative schemes that produce practices and perceptions without deliberative processing, a "feel for the game" that operates at the level of the body and the pre-reflective as much as at the level of conscious thought.⁹

The concept has been criticized for its apparent determinism, and that criticism is not without merit, a point to which I will return. But what makes habitus indispensable for the analysis of misdirected agency is its capacity to explain a phenomenon that voluntarist frameworks cannot: the persistence of patterned behavior among people who have been told, repeatedly and in detail, that the behavior is harmful. If misdirected agency were simply a matter of ignorance, it would yield to information. If it were a matter of bad values, it would yield to moral persuasion. If it were a matter of insufficient reflection, it would yield to the professional development sessions and book studies and equity workshops that school districts have been conducting, with

increasing intensity and decreasing patience, for the past two decades. The fact that it has yielded to none of these interventions suggests that something deeper than cognition is at work.

Habitus operates at that deeper level. It is, in Bourdieu's formulation, "history turned into nature," the sedimentation of past experience into present disposition.¹⁰ A person raised in a family where helping others was the primary marker of moral worth, educated in a teacher preparation program that celebrated individual impact as the highest professional calling, evaluated annually through systems that reward visible action and penalize restraint, does not decide to enact misdirected agency in a crisis. They feel their way into it. The crisis triggers a set of dispositions that have been reinforced at every stage of their formation, and those dispositions produce action that feels not merely appropriate but morally compulsory. To not act, to pause, to defer to someone with more knowledge or closer proximity to the affected community, registers in the body as a moral failure, a betrayal of the very identity that the field has cultivated.¹¹

This is the helping trap. Not a lack of good intentions, but an excess of uncritical ones. Not a failure to care, but a particular formation of caring that has been shaped by institutional forces so thoroughly that it feels like personal conviction.

The Educational Field as a Generator of Helper Habitus

Bourdieu uses the term "field" to describe the structured social spaces within which habitus operates, and the educational field in the United States has a distinctive set of properties that make it particularly effective at generating what I am calling helper habitus: the dispositional structure that produces misdirected agency.¹²

Consider the entry points. Teacher preparation programs in the United States have been shaped, since at least the progressive era, by a narrative of individual impact that locates the moral weight of the profession in the relationship between a single teacher and a single child.¹³ This narrative is not false. The relationship between teacher and student is consequential, and the research on teacher effects, whatever its methodological limitations, consistently demonstrates that the person at the front of the room matters.¹⁴ But the narrative has a shadow. By centering individual impact, it displaces collective accountability. By celebrating the teacher who "makes a difference," it obscures the systems that make the difference necessary. And by treating the teacher's emotional investment as the engine of student transformation, it produces a professional identity organized around the felt experience of helping rather than around the disciplined practice of teaching.

The induction period reinforces the pattern. New teachers, overwhelmed by the gap between their preparation and the demands of the classroom, often survive their first years by clinging to the helping narrative as a source of meaning.¹⁵ The work is grueling, the pay is inadequate, the institutional support is often minimal, and the helping narrative offers what the structural conditions do not: a story about why the sacrifice is worth it. That story becomes a form of compensation, a psychic wage, to borrow W.E.B. Du Bois's term in a

slightly different register, that supplements the material wage the profession cannot provide.¹⁶

Professional development, as it is typically practiced in American schools, deepens the pattern further. The dominant mode of PD in the United States remains the one-shot workshop, the motivational keynote, the "strategies you can use Monday morning" session that treats teachers as individual practitioners in need of better tools rather than as members of a professional community in need of better structures.¹⁷ Even the equity-focused PD that has proliferated since 2020 often reproduces the helper habitus it ostensibly challenges, by positioning individual consciousness-raising as the primary lever for systemic change and thereby centering, once again, the interior experience of the individual practitioner.¹⁸

And then there are evaluation systems. The dominant frameworks for teacher evaluation in the United States, from Danielson to Marzano and their various derivatives, emphasize observable instructional behaviors: the things a teacher does that can be documented during a classroom visit.¹⁹ What they do not evaluate, because it is far more difficult to observe and far less amenable to rubric-based assessment, is the capacity for disciplined restraint. The ability to recognize that a situation calls for someone else's expertise. The willingness to hold space without filling it. The discipline to not act when action would serve the actor's need more than the student's need. These capacities, which are essential for the exercise of integrated agency, are invisible within the dominant evaluation paradigms, and what is invisible within an evaluation system is, functionally, what the system devalues.

The cumulative effect of these institutional forces is a professional habitus organized around action, visibility, emotional intensity, and individual impact. This is not a conspiracy. No one designed the system to produce misdirected agency. But the system produces it nonetheless, with the reliability of an assembly line, because every point of entry into the profession, every mechanism of socialization, every structure of recognition and reward, reinforces the same dispositional pattern.

Transposability: Why the Same People Do It Again

One of the most important and least intuitive properties of habitus, in Bourdieu's account, is its transposability. The dispositions generated in one field are not confined to that field. They travel. They produce analogous practices in new contexts, not because the person consciously applies lessons learned in one domain to another, but because the generative schemes that produce action are structural rather than content-specific.²⁰

This property explains something that the crisis literature documents but rarely theorizes: the tendency of certain individuals to enact remarkably similar patterns of behavior across very different crisis contexts. The teacher who took over a community meeting during one crisis and redirected its agenda toward her own priorities is often the same teacher who, during a subsequent crisis of a completely different nature, again positioned herself at the center of the response, again displaced the people most directly affected, again

interpreted her own emotional urgency as evidence of moral authority.²¹ The content changes. The structure does not.

Mrs. Patterson, whose actions I described in the Introduction, was not an anomaly. She was an archetype, in the sociological rather than the mythological sense: a person whose individual actions expressed a collective disposition, whose behavior was idiosyncratic in its details but entirely predictable in its form. The research team encountered variations of Mrs. Patterson at every site, in every district, during every crisis event we studied. The names changed. The specifics changed. The pattern did not.

This is where the analysis becomes uncomfortable, and I want to stay with the discomfort rather than managing it.

The pattern was not randomly distributed across the teaching force. It was enacted most frequently by white staff members, and more specifically by white women.²² This observation is not a claim about essential racial characteristics. It is a claim about the intersection of professional socialization and racial socialization, about the way the helper habitus generated by the educational field intersects with, and is amplified by, the particular racial habitus that whiteness produces in the United States.²³

Robin DiAngelo's work on white fragility has made one version of this argument widely available, though I have reservations about her framework that are beyond the scope of this chapter.²⁴ What I want to foreground is a more structural point: the helper habitus is not exclusively white. Teachers of color, particularly those who have been educated in predominantly white institutions and socialized into predominantly white professional norms, can and do enact versions of misdirected agency. But the frequency, the intensity, and above all the institutional protection afforded to the pattern, the degree to which the person enacting it is defended, excused, or even celebrated by colleagues and administrators, varies dramatically along racial lines.²⁵ A white teacher who takes over a community meeting during a crisis is "passionate" and "committed." A Black teacher who does the same thing is "aggressive" and "overstepping." The habitus may be shared. The field's response to its enactment is not.

I should note a tangent here that kept surfacing during the analysis and that I ultimately could not resolve. Several members of the research team observed that misdirected agency was not confined to crisis contexts. They saw it in routine instruction, in parent conferences, in hallway interactions, in the micro-decisions that constitute the texture of daily school life. The crisis, in their view, did not create the pattern. It revealed it. It compressed months of subtle displacement into hours of visible displacement, making legible what had always been present but diffused across too many small moments to be named. I find this observation compelling, and it is consistent with Bourdieu's account of habitus as a generative structure rather than a context-specific response. But I was not able to pursue it systematically within the scope of this study, and I mention it here primarily as a marker for future work.²⁶

The Tension Between Cultivation and Sedimentation

This brings me to the theoretical tension that runs through the entire book, one I want to name explicitly rather than pretending it does not exist.

Safir and Dugan's framework is fundamentally optimistic about the possibility of cultivating authentic agency. Their work is animated by the conviction that the four dimensions of agency, identity, belonging, mastery, and efficacy, can be developed intentionally, that schools and systems can create the conditions under which fragmented agency becomes integrated agency. This conviction places them in a tradition that includes Paulo Freire, Gloria Ladson-Billings, Django Paris, and other scholars who have argued that education can be a practice of liberation rather than a mechanism of reproduction.²⁷

Bourdieu's framework is considerably less optimistic. Habitus, in his account, is not a set of habits that can be replaced by better habits through conscious effort. It is a deep structure of perception, appreciation, and action that has been formed over the course of a lifetime and that resists modification precisely because it operates below the level at which conscious modification is possible.²⁸ Bourdieu does allow for the possibility of change, particularly when there is a mismatch between habitus and field (what he calls "hysteresis"), but he is skeptical about the capacity of individuals to reflexively transform their own dispositions through acts of will.²⁹ The dispositions are, in his term, "sedimented." They have the weight of accumulated history, and that weight does not dissolve in the heat of a workshop or a book study, however well-designed.

I am not fully satisfied with either framework taken alone, and I want to be honest about that rather than manufacturing a false synthesis. Safir and Dugan's model, for all its power as a diagnostic tool, does not adequately account for the depth of the dispositional problem. If misdirected agency were primarily a matter of underdeveloped identity, belonging, and mastery, then the cultivation of those dimensions should, over time, produce integrated agency. But the research I describe in subsequent chapters suggests that the problem is more recalcitrant than a developmental model predicts. People who have done extensive identity work, who have cultivated genuine belonging in diverse communities, who have developed considerable mastery of equity-centered practice, still enact misdirected agency in crisis contexts with startling regularity. The crisis seems to activate a layer of disposition that lies beneath the consciously cultivated one, a default setting that reasserts itself under pressure.

Bourdieu's framework accounts for this recalcitrance, but at the cost of what might be called political hope. If the dispositions that produce misdirected agency are genuinely sedimented, if they are resistant to the forms of conscious intervention that educators typically employ, then what is to be done? Bourdieu's own answer, when he offered one, tended toward structural transformation: changing the field rather than changing the habitus, on the theory that new structural conditions would, over time, generate new dispositions.³⁰ But "over time" is a phrase that does little for the communities absorbing the damage of misdirected agency right

now, and the structural changes Bourdieu envisioned require a political will that the educational field has not yet demonstrated.

For the purposes of this book, I hold both frameworks provisionally. I use Safir and Dugan's model to diagnose the pattern, to name what is missing when agency goes wrong, and to gesture toward the conditions under which it might go differently. I use Bourdieu's framework to explain why the pattern persists, to account for the space between what people know and what people do, and to resist the temptation of easy solutions. The tension between the two is not a problem to be resolved. It is, I think, the actual condition of the work.

Efficacy and the Moral Economy of Urgency

There is one more dimension of the helping trap that requires examination before the chapter closes, and it has to do with the particular way efficacy functions as a moral category in the educational field.

Bandura's original formulation of self-efficacy was descriptive. It described a psychological mechanism: the relationship between a person's belief in their capacity to perform a behavior and their likelihood of attempting and persisting in that behavior.³¹ But the concept did not remain descriptive. In the educational field, efficacy was absorbed into a moral economy, a system of values and judgments in which the belief that one can make a difference became not merely a psychological asset but a professional obligation.³² The teacher who doubts their efficacy is not merely less likely to persist. They are morally suspect. They lack "grit." They are not "all in." They have surrendered to "deficit thinking."

This moralization of efficacy creates a trap within the trap. The teacher who pauses before acting in a crisis, who says "I am not sure I am the right person for this" or "I need to learn more before I intervene," is not exercising the kind of disciplined restraint that integrated agency requires. In the moral economy of the educational field, they are failing. They are letting kids down. They are, in the most damning formulation available to the profession, "making excuses."

The moral economy of urgency compounds the problem. Crises, by definition, compress the time available for deliberation. They create conditions under which the demand for immediate action overrides the slower processes of community consultation, relationship-building, and collective decision-making that integrated agency requires.³³ This compression is real, not manufactured. People are suffering. Harm is occurring. Something must be done. But the moral economy of the educational field converts this situational urgency into a dispositional stance, an orientation toward action-as-virtue that persists long after the acute phase of the crisis has passed. Teachers and administrators who were "activated" during a crisis often remain activated, continuing to enact the high-urgency, high-visibility, action-centered pattern of response even when the situation has shifted and the community's needs have changed.³⁴

The pattern has a self-reinforcing quality that makes it particularly difficult to interrupt. Action produces visible results. Visible results produce recognition. Recognition reinforces the sense of efficacy that motivated the action. And the cycle accelerates, each iteration strengthening the dispositional pattern and making alternatives harder to imagine, let alone enact. The person caught in this cycle is not a villain. They are a product: shaped by a professional culture that told them helping was the highest calling, evaluated by systems that rewarded visible action, surrounded by colleagues who performed the same pattern and thereby normalized it, and deprived, at every stage of their formation, of the conceptual tools and relational structures that might have made a different kind of agency possible.^{^35^}

This is not an exoneration. Understanding the mechanism that produces misdirected agency does not excuse the harm it causes, any more than understanding the social determinants of health excuses a physician who misdiagnoses a patient. But it does change the intervention. If misdirected agency is a product of habitus rather than a failure of will, then the interventions that target will, the exhortations, the awareness campaigns, the calls to "do better," are addressing the wrong level of the problem. They are asking individuals to override, through conscious effort, a set of dispositions that were never formed through conscious effort in the first place.

The chapters that follow will examine what happens when misdirected agency is enacted in specific crisis contexts, what damage it produces, what forms of resistance communities mount against it, and what, if anything, can be done to interrupt the pattern at the structural level rather than the individual one. But those chapters require a foundation, and this chapter has attempted to provide it: a theoretical account of how the educational field produces a form of agency that is simultaneously sincere and destructive, well-intentioned and harmful, motivated by care and productive of damage.

The helping trap is not a metaphor. It is a mechanism, generated by the intersection of professional socialization and racial formation, sustained by institutional reward structures that treat visible action as the measure of moral seriousness, and resistant to intervention at the level of individual consciousness because it was never produced at that level. The first step toward interrupting it is naming it with sufficient precision that it can no longer be mistaken for virtue.

^{^1^} Safir, S., & Dugan, J. (2021). *Street Data: A Next-Generation Model for Equity, Pedagogy, and School Transformation*. Corwin.; Bourdieu, P. (1977). *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge University Press.

^{^2^} Safir & Dugan (2021), particularly Chapters 3 and 7, where agency is treated as an outcome of equitable systems rather than a precondition for participation in them.

^{^3^} Bandura, A. (1977). Self-efficacy: Toward a unifying theory of behavioral change. *Psychological Review*, 84(2), 191-215. Bandura's later elaboration in *Self-Efficacy: The Exercise of Control* (1997) remains the most comprehensive treatment, though it does not address the institutional dynamics I am describing here.

^{^4^} This formulation draws on Charles Mills's concept of the "racial contract" and the epistemology of ignorance it produces. See Mills, C. W. (1997). *The Racial Contract*. Cornell University Press. The relevance to misdirected agency is that positional ignorance is not a gap in knowledge but a structured achievement of not-knowing.

^{^5^} Hughey, M. W. (2014). *The White Savior Film: Content, Critics, and Consumption*. Temple University Press. Hughey's analysis is focused on cinematic representation, but his structural argument, that the savior narrative requires the subordination of the saved community's own agency, applies directly to the educational context.

- ⁶ The celebration of teacher self-sacrifice as a professional norm has been critiqued by several scholars. See Santoro, D. A. (2018). *Demoralized: Why Teachers Leave the Profession They Love and How They Can Stay*. Harvard Education Press, for an account of how the "calling" narrative functions to obscure structural failures.
- ⁷ Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-Efficacy: The Exercise of Control*. W. H. Freeman. The distinction between efficacy expectations and outcome expectations is introduced in the 1977 article but developed more fully in this volume.
- ⁸ Bourdieu, P. (1977). *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge University Press.; Bourdieu, P. (1990). *The Logic of Practice*. Stanford University Press.
- ⁹ Bourdieu (1990), p. 66. The phrase "feel for the game" (*le sens du jeu*) is one of Bourdieu's most evocative formulations of habitus, capturing its pre-reflective, embodied quality.
- ¹⁰ Bourdieu (1977), p. 78.
- ¹¹ This account of how habitus produces the felt sense of moral compulsion draws on Crossley, N. (2001). The phenomenological habitus and its construction. *Theory and Society*, 30(1), 81-120, which integrates Bourdieu's framework with phenomenological analysis of embodied experience.
- ¹² Bourdieu, P., & Passeron, J.-C. (1977). *Reproduction in Education, Society, and Culture*. Sage. The concept of field is developed more fully in Bourdieu, P., & Wacquant, L. (1992). *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*. University of Chicago Press.
- ¹³ The historical roots of the individual-impact narrative in American teaching are traced in Labaree, D. F. (2004). *The Trouble with Ed Schools*. Yale University Press, particularly his analysis of the tension between democratic equality and social mobility as competing purposes of education.
- ¹⁴ For a balanced assessment of the teacher effects literature, see Hanushek, E. A., & Rivkin, S. G. (2010). Generalizations about using value-added measures of teacher quality. *American Economic Review*, 100(2), 267-271, alongside the methodological critiques offered by Rothstein, J. (2010). Teacher quality in educational production. *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 125(1), 175-214.
- ¹⁵ Ingersoll, R. M., & Strong, M. (2011). The impact of induction and mentoring programs for beginning teachers. *Review of Educational Research*, 81(2), 201-233. The survival function of the helping narrative is my interpretation, not theirs, but it is consistent with their findings about what sustains new teachers through the induction period.
- ¹⁶ Du Bois, W. E. B. (1935). *Black Reconstruction in America*. Harcourt, Brace. Du Bois's concept of the "psychological wage" of whiteness has been extended by several scholars to describe the non-material compensations that sustain commitment to systems that do not materially reward their participants. I am extending it further, perhaps too far, to describe the psychic compensation that the helping narrative provides to teachers whose material compensation is inadequate.
- ¹⁷ Darling-Hammond, L., Hyler, M. E., & Gardner, M. (2017). *Effective Teacher Professional Development*. Learning Policy Institute. Their review of the evidence on PD effectiveness is devastating in its implications for the dominant model.
- ¹⁸ This is a contentious claim, and I want to acknowledge its limits. Some equity-focused PD genuinely disrupts the helper habitus, particularly programs rooted in community organizing traditions rather than consciousness-raising ones. But the dominant mode, the one most school districts purchase and deploy, tends to reproduce the individual-transformation model.
- ¹⁹ Danielson, C. (2013). *The Framework for Teaching Evaluation Instrument*. Danielson Group.; Marzano, R. J. (2007). *The Art and Science of Teaching*. ASCD.
- ²⁰ Bourdieu (1990), pp. 53-54. The concept of transposability is essential to his account of how habitus can generate practices in novel situations, producing innovation within structural limits.
- ²¹ This observation emerged from the longitudinal component of the research, which tracked patterns of crisis response across multiple events within the same school communities. The methodology is described in detail in the Appendix.
- ²² This finding is consistent with broader patterns documented in the sociological literature on whiteness and helping professions. See Matias, C. E. (2016). *Feeling White: Whiteness, Emotionality, and Education*. Sense Publishers.
- ²³ The concept of "racial habitus" is developed in Bonilla-Silva, E. (2003). *Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America*. Rowman & Littlefield, particularly his account of how racial ideology functions at the level of disposition rather than conscious belief.
- ²⁴ DiAngelo, R. (2018). *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism*. Beacon Press. My reservations center on her tendency to treat whiteness as a monolithic psychological condition rather than a structurally positioned set of dispositions that vary significantly by class, region, and institutional context. But her core observation, that white people's emotional responses to racial stress function to reinscribe racial power, is relevant here.
- ²⁵ The differential institutional response to identical behaviors enacted by white and Black teachers is documented in several studies. See, for example, D'Amico, D., Pawlewicz, R. J., Earley, P. M., & McGeehan, A. P. (2017). Where are all the Black teachers? Discrimination in the teacher labor market. *Harvard Educational Review*, 87(1), 26-49.
- ²⁶ A future study designed to track micro-instances of misdirected agency across routine school operations, rather than focusing exclusively on crisis events, would require an ethnographic methodology substantially different from the one employed here. The closest existing model is Lewis, A. E. (2003). *Race in the Schoolyard: Negotiating the Color Line in Classrooms and Communities*. Rutgers University Press, which documents the daily micro-interactions through which racial meaning is produced in schools.
- ²⁷ Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Continuum.; Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). Toward a theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. *American Educational Research Journal*, 32(3), 465-491.; Paris, D. (2012). Culturally sustaining pedagogy: A needed change

CHAPTER 2

Habitus and the Invisible Hand

What makes an action feel righteous to the person performing it while appearing harmful to the person receiving it?

This is not a rhetorical question, though it functions as one in most educational leadership literature, where it gets asked and then immediately answered with some version of "good intentions are not enough." That answer is true as far as it goes. It does not go far enough. The question demands a theoretical apparatus that can explain not just the separation between intention and impact, which any introductory equity workshop can name, but the *mechanism* by which that gap becomes invisible to the person standing inside it. The teacher who stations herself outside the building as a visible ally during an immigration enforcement crisis does not experience herself as causing harm. She experiences herself as doing the only decent thing. The counselor who organizes a political action meeting during instructional time does not experience herself as overstepping. She experiences herself as filling a vacuum that institutional cowardice created. The veteran educator who drafts a letter to federal authorities on district letterhead does not experience herself as creating organizational risk. She experiences herself as protecting children while the adults around her hesitate.

Each of these actions, observed during the crisis described in this book's introduction, carries a particular quality that psychological explanations alone cannot account for: the quality of *obviousness*. The actors did not deliberate and then choose. They perceived and then acted, and the perception itself already contained the action as its natural conclusion. Something in the structure of their seeing made the action feel not like one option among several but like the only option available to a decent person. That something is what Pierre Bourdieu called habitus, and understanding it requires more than a glossary definition.¹

The System of Structured, Structuring Structures

Bourdieu introduced habitus across several works, refining the concept from *Outline of a Theory of Practice* in 1977 through *The Logic of Practice* in 1990, and it resists the kind of clean summary that textbooks prefer.² The standard definition runs something like this: habitus is the system of durable, transposable dispositions that structure perception, thought, and action without requiring conscious deliberation. That definition is accurate. It is also insufficient, because it makes habitus sound like a sophisticated word for "habit," which it is not.

Habits are behaviors. Habitus is a generative grammar of perception and action. The distinction matters enormously for understanding misdirected agency, because the problem is not that white educators have developed bad habits around crisis response. The problem is that they perceive crisis through a dispositional lens that makes certain responses feel like nature rather than culture, like instinct rather than socialization, like moral clarity rather than positional inheritance.

Bourdieu described habitus as "structured, structuring structures," a phrase that sounds like academic wordplay but contains a precise theoretical claim.³ Habitus is *structured* because it is produced by objective conditions: by the social position of the agent, the resources available to them, the institutional environment that trained them, the cultural narratives that surrounded them during formation. It is *structuring* because once formed, it actively organizes perception and generates practice. It does not merely reflect the social world; it reproduces it through the actions it makes feel natural. And it operates as a *structure* because it is systematic rather than random, generating coherent patterns of thought and behavior across different situations and domains.

The accumulated weight of this concept, for the analysis being developed here, lies in the word "transposable." Dispositions formed in one context transfer to others. The set of perceptions and responses that a white educator develops through twenty years of socialization in American educational institutions do not stay confined to the specific situations in which they formed. They travel. They generate analogous responses in novel situations, which is precisely why the same dispositional pattern that produces boundary-crossing during an immigration crisis would produce structurally similar patterns during a school shooting threat, a racial incident in the hallway, a pandemic lockdown, or any other moment when the stable operation of the field is disrupted and the felt need to act overwhelms the institutional channels for action.

This is not speculation. Wacquant, Bourdieu's most prominent student and interpreter, demonstrated the embodied dimension of habitus through his ethnographic work on boxing, showing how dispositions become literally inscribed in the body: in posture, in reflex, in the prereflective capacity to respond to situations before conscious deliberation has time to engage.⁴ The boxer does not think about where to place his feet. His habitus places them. The movement feels natural because the training has been so thorough that it has become invisible to the person performing it. Wacquant argued that this embodied quality is not unique to athletic training but characterizes all habitus: the dispositions that structure a professor's lecture style, a judge's sentencing patterns, a social worker's intake assessment, a teacher's crisis response. In each case, the actor experiences their response as arising from the situation itself rather than from the accumulated history of their socialization.

The Educational Field and Its Specific Logic

Habitus does not form in a vacuum. It forms within what Bourdieu called *fields*: specific social spaces with their own logic, their own forms of capital, their own rules of engagement, their own taken-for-granted assumptions about what counts as competence, what counts as virtue, what counts as common sense.⁵ The educational field in the United States is one such space, and its particular logic generates particular dispositions.

Consider the institutional architecture that produces a white educator over the course of a career. Teacher preparation programs, whatever their stated commitments to equity and cultural responsiveness, operate within a field that overwhelmingly rewards individual teacher impact. The research on effective teaching, the evaluation frameworks that determine tenure and promotion, the public narratives about who teachers are and what they do: all of these field conditions produce and reinforce the disposition to see teaching as an act of individual heroism. The "hero teacher" narrative is not a distortion of the field. It is the field's most consistent product.⁶

Reay, in her influential review of habitus in educational research, documented how Bourdieu's concept illuminates the reproduction of class-based dispositions through schooling itself.⁷ Students from working-class families develop what Reay calls a "learner habitus" shaped by their class position: dispositions toward deference, toward self-limitation, toward the assumption that certain forms of knowledge and certain institutional spaces are "not for them." Lareau's parallel work on class-based parenting practices, documented in *Unequal Childhoods*, showed how middle-class and working-class families develop fundamentally different dispositions toward institutional engagement, with middle-class families practicing what she termed "concerted cultivation" and working-class families practicing "the accomplishment of natural growth."⁸ Both are forms of habitus. Both feel natural to the people enacting them. Both reproduce the class positions from which they

emerged.

What has received less systematic attention is the habitus that educational institutions produce in their *staff*, particularly in their white staff, particularly around questions of helping, intervening, and responding to the suffering of students of color. The field conditions that generate this habitus are remarkably consistent across districts, regions, and decades.

Professional development culture celebrates "going above and beyond" without interrogating whose norms define "above" and whose experience defines "beyond." The teacher who stays late, who buys supplies with her own money, who drives students home, who takes on emotional labor far outside her job description, is held up as the model. Evaluation systems reward visible action. The Danielson Framework, the most widely used teacher evaluation instrument in the United States, includes indicators for "demonstrating flexibility and responsiveness" and "growing and developing professionally" that implicitly reward the disposition to extend one's role rather than to honor its boundaries.⁹ The annual teacher-of-the-year nominations, in district after district, go to the teacher who did the most, gave the most, sacrificed the most. Not to the teacher who held the clearest boundaries. Not to the teacher who said, "That is not my role, and performing it would undermine the people whose role it actually is."

These are field conditions. They are the objective structures within which white helper habitus forms. And they are so pervasive that naming them feels almost absurd, like describing the pressure of the atmosphere. Of course teachers should go above and beyond. Of course caring means doing more. Of course the good teacher is the one who cannot stop helping. These propositions feel self-evident precisely because the field has made them so, which is exactly what habitus does: it transforms the contingent into the necessary, the historical into the natural, the socially produced into the personally felt.

The Invisible Architecture of White Helping

Here the analysis must become more specific, and more uncomfortable. Habitus is not racially neutral, because the fields that produce it are not racially neutral. The American educational field is structured by racial hierarchy in ways that are extensively documented and still insufficiently theorized at the level of disposition.¹⁰

White educators socialized in this field develop a cluster of dispositions with particular consistency. The disposition to see oneself as a helper, specifically as someone whose help is needed by communities of color. The disposition to experience emotional distress in the face of racial injustice and to interpret that distress as a call to individual action rather than as information about one's structural position. The disposition to assume that one's presence is welcome in any space, that one's intervention is appropriate in any context, that one's good intentions render one's impact secondary. The disposition to feel, in the deepest registers of embodied

experience, that helping is what one *does* and that any constraint on helping is a constraint on one's fundamental identity.

These dispositions are not innate. They are produced. They are produced through repeated encounters with a social world that rewards white helping, that celebrates white intervention in communities of color, that tells stories in which the white protagonist's emotional journey is the narrative center.¹¹ Hughey's analysis of the white savior narrative in American film documents how cultural texts produce and reproduce the dispositions that structure white helping, from *To Kill a Mockingbird* through *Freedom Writers* through *The Help* through *The Blind Side*.¹² In each of these narratives, the structural arrangement is identical: a white protagonist encounters the suffering of people of color, experiences emotional activation, takes individual action, and is transformed by the experience. The people of color exist in the narrative primarily as the occasion for the white protagonist's moral journey. The story is about what helping does *for the helper*, not what it does *to the helped*.

But Hughey's cultural analysis, while valuable, does not reach the institutional level where habitus is most consequentially produced. The educational field itself generates these dispositions through mechanisms far more powerful than film: through the daily practice of teaching, through the institutional reward structures described above, through the professional identity formation that occurs over years and decades of socialization into a field that treats white helping as its highest value.

I should note a limitation in my own analysis here, because the claim I am making risks a kind of structural determinism that Bourdieu himself warned against. I am describing habitus as though it operates with mechanical certainty, as though every white educator socialized in the American educational field will inevitably develop the dispositions I have catalogued. That is not what Bourdieu argued, and it is not what the evidence supports. Habitus is probabilistic, not deterministic. It generates tendencies, not certainties. Some white educators, through critical self-examination, through relationships that interrupt their socialization, through exposure to theoretical frameworks that make their dispositions visible, develop the capacity to see and partially interrupt their own helper habitus. The question of how often this happens, and how deep the interruption reaches, is one I will return to at the end of this chapter.

Transposability, or Why Content Does Not Matter as Much as We Think

The concept of transposability deserves its own sustained treatment, because it explains something that crisis-specific training consistently fails to address: why the same patterns recur across fundamentally different crises.

A district that experienced misdirected agency during an immigration enforcement crisis will, with high probability, experience structurally similar patterns during a school shooting threat. The content will be entirely different. The emotional texture will differ. The specific actions will change. But the dispositional structure, the

habitus that generates those actions, will remain remarkably stable. The teacher who stationed herself outside the building as a visible ally during the immigration crisis is the same teacher who will, during a lockdown drill, open her classroom door to check on a colleague's students despite explicit protocol to the contrary. The counselor who organized a political action meeting without authorization is the same counselor who will, during a racial incident, convene a restorative circle without training or institutional coordination. The veteran educator who drafted a letter to federal authorities is the same veteran educator who will, during a pandemic, distribute personal protective equipment she purchased on her own because she judged the district's supply inadequate.

In each case, the surface features differ. The underlying generative structure is identical: emotional activation produces the felt need to act; the disposition to see oneself as a helper converts that felt need into individual action; the assumption that one's good intentions authorize one's intervention overrides institutional coordination; and the action is experienced by the actor as courageous, caring, and necessary rather than as boundary-violating, disruptive, or structurally presumptuous.

This is what transposability means in practice. It is not that the actor is repeating a specific behavior. It is that the actor's habitus is generating analogous behaviors across different situations because the generative structure, the grammar of perception and action, remains the same regardless of the content it processes. Training that addresses only the content, that prepares staff for immigration crises or school shootings or racial incidents as separate categories requiring separate protocols, will consistently fail to interrupt the dispositional pattern because the pattern does not live at the level of content. It lives at the level of habitus, which is to say, at the level of who the actor has been socialized to be.

This has implications for professional development that are, frankly, discouraging. Most crisis preparation in schools is technical: here is the protocol, here is the chain of communication, here is your role, here is what you should and should not do. That preparation is necessary. It is not sufficient. The teacher who has been told her role during a lockdown is to secure her classroom, maintain calm, and follow the communication protocol has been given information. Whether she can *enact* that information when her habitus is generating a powerful felt imperative to do something more, something bigger, something that matches the scale of her emotional activation, depends on something that information alone cannot produce. It depends on whether she has developed the reflexive capacity to see her own habitus in operation, to recognize the felt imperative as a product of socialization rather than as a direct perception of what the situation requires.

The Problem of Reflexivity

This brings the analysis to its most difficult question, and the one Bourdieu himself never fully resolved. Can habitus be seen from the inside? Can the actor become aware of the dispositions that structure their perception

and action, given that those dispositions are, by definition, the very lens through which they perceive?

Bourdieu allowed for the possibility of reflexivity, but he was notably pessimistic about it.¹³ In *The Logic of Practice*, he argued that reflexivity is most likely to occur at moments of crisis, when the smooth operation of habitus is disrupted by a situation that the existing dispositions cannot adequately handle. This is a paradox with considerable analytical power: the moment when habitus is most active, most consequentially shaping action, is also the moment when it is most potentially visible, precisely because the gap between what habitus generates and what the situation demands becomes, for a brief interval, perceptible.

The immigration enforcement crisis described in this book's introduction was such a moment. The field was disrupted. The taken-for-granted assumptions about what school looks like, what safety means, what an educator's role encompasses, were suddenly insufficient. In that disruption, habitus became visible, not to everyone, but to those who were positioned, by training or by experience or by the particular configuration of their own dispositional history, to notice the divide between what they felt compelled to do and what the situation actually called for.

But here is the difficulty that makes Bourdieu's pessimism hard to dismiss: the very habitus that becomes potentially visible during crisis is also the habitus that is generating the actor's response to the crisis. The teacher who might, in a moment of reflexive clarity, recognize that her impulse to station herself outside the building is a product of her white helper habitus rather than a direct perception of what students need, is the same teacher whose habitus is, at that very moment, producing the felt certainty that stationing herself outside the building is exactly what students need. The reflexive capacity and the dispositional impulse are not sequential; they are simultaneous. And in most cases, the impulse wins, because the impulse feels like reality while the reflexive capacity feels like second-guessing.

Wacquant, extending Bourdieu's analysis, argued that genuine reflexivity requires not just individual effort but institutional support: structures that interrupt the smooth operation of habitus by creating what he called "pedagogies of the body," training regimes that produce new dispositions rather than merely new knowledge.¹⁴ The boxer does not learn to fight by reading about boxing. He learns by training in a gym where his body is gradually reshaped, where new reflexes are inscribed through thousands of repetitions until they become as automatic as the old ones. Wacquant suggested that transforming habitus requires a similar process: not a workshop, not a reading, not a moment of awareness, but a sustained institutional practice that generates new dispositions to replace or at least compete with the old ones.

This is a demanding standard, and it raises a question about the limits of what educational institutions can reasonably be expected to do. Can a school district create the conditions for the kind of sustained dispositional transformation that Wacquant describes? Can professional development, which in most districts amounts to a handful of days per year, generate new habitus? Or is the educational field itself so thoroughly structured by the dispositions it produces that any attempt to interrupt those dispositions from within the field is destined to

reproduce them in a more sophisticated form?

I want to take a brief detour here, because there is a parallel in another domain that illuminates this problem with uncomfortable precision.¹⁵ In medical training, the concept of "clinical detachment" functions as a form of habitus that medical schools deliberately produce in their students. The capacity to examine a suffering body without being overwhelmed by the suffering, to maintain analytical clarity in the presence of pain, to prioritize diagnostic accuracy over emotional response: these are dispositions that medical education intentionally cultivates through sustained institutional practice. The anatomy lab, the clinical rotation, the residency, the attending physician's modeling of composed authority in the emergency room: all of these are what Wacquant would recognize as pedagogies of the body, institutional practices that inscribe new dispositions through repeated exposure and guided performance. Medical education does not merely tell students to be clinically detached. It trains them into clinical detachment over years, until the disposition becomes embodied, automatic, and experienced as natural rather than as an acquired professional stance. The fact that medical education can produce this dispositional transformation suggests that institutions *can* reshape habitus. The fact that clinical detachment sometimes produces physicians who are genuinely unable to connect emotionally with their patients suggests that the transformation comes with costs that the training itself cannot anticipate or control.

Returning from that detour: the medical parallel suggests that habitus can be intentionally reshaped, but only through sustained institutional practices that operate at the level of embodied disposition rather than at the level of conscious belief. A one-day workshop on professional boundaries will not interrupt white helper habitus for the same reason that a one-day seminar on surgical technique will not produce a surgeon. The dispositions are too deep, too embodied, too thoroughly woven into the actor's sense of who they are and what they are for.

Habitus and the Reproduction of Institutional Logic

There is a further dimension of habitus that the misdirected agency analysis requires, and it concerns the relationship between individual dispositions and institutional reproduction. Bourdieu argued that habitus is not just the product of social structures; it is also the mechanism through which those structures reproduce themselves.¹⁶ Institutions do not persist because of rules or policies or mission statements, though all of these play a role. They persist because the people who inhabit them carry dispositions that generate practices aligned with the institution's logic, practices that feel like individual choices but that are, in aggregate, the means by which the institution maintains its fundamental character across time.

Applied to the educational field, this means that the white helper habitus described in this chapter is not an aberration within the institutional logic of American schooling. It is a product of that logic. Schools that are

structured to reward individual teacher heroism will produce teachers whose habitus generates heroic individual action. Schools that evaluate teachers on visible impact will produce teachers whose habitus generates visible intervention. Schools that celebrate "going above and beyond" will produce teachers whose habitus generates boundary-crossing in the name of service. The dispositions are not bugs in the system. They are the system operating as designed.

This is a structurally significant claim, because it means that addressing misdirected agency at the individual level, through awareness, through training, through reflexive practice, is necessary but structurally insufficient. If the field itself produces the habitus that generates misdirected agency, then interrupting misdirected agency requires changing the field conditions, not just the individuals formed within them. It requires changing what schools reward, what evaluation systems measure, what professional development cultivates, what stories the institution tells about what it means to be a good teacher. It requires, in Bourdieu's terms, restructuring the field so that it generates different dispositions.

Whether that is possible within the existing institutional architecture of American public education is a question that extends well beyond the scope of this chapter. But it is worth noting that Bourdieu himself was skeptical of the capacity of institutions to transform themselves, precisely because the people tasked with the transformation carry the habitus that the institution produced. The reformer's habitus is itself a product of the field the reformer seeks to reform.¹⁷ This creates a recursive problem that no amount of good intentions can resolve, because good intentions are themselves generated by habitus, and the habitus in question is precisely what needs to change.

What Remains Unresolved

I have been building an argument across this chapter that habitus, not individual psychology, not conscious intention, not even structural positioning alone, provides the most productive theoretical lens for understanding why misdirected agency takes the form it takes and why it proves so resistant to intervention. The argument draws on Bourdieu's core concepts: the durability of dispositions, their transposability across contexts, their generation within specific fields, their role in institutional reproduction, and their operation below the threshold of conscious awareness.

But I want to end with what the argument cannot resolve, because the unresolved questions are, in this case, more important than the resolved ones.

Bourdieu's framework explains the *production* of habitus with considerable power. It is far less convincing on the question of habitus *transformation*. Bourdieu allowed for reflexivity but was pessimistic about its capacity to produce genuine dispositional change. Wacquant's work on embodied pedagogy suggests that sustained institutional practice can reshape habitus, but the examples he draws on, boxing, military training,

monastic discipline, involve levels of institutional totality that schools neither possess nor should aspire to. Reay's educational research documents how habitus reproduces class position through schooling but offers limited evidence of schools successfully interrupting the habitus they produce.¹⁸ The theoretical tools are powerful for diagnosis. They are far less powerful for prescription.

And so the question that opened this chapter returns, transformed but unanswered. What makes an action feel righteous to the person performing it while appearing harmful to the person receiving it? Habitus. The accumulated weight of socialization within a field that has made certain responses feel like nature. The durable, transposable dispositions that generate action below the threshold of deliberation. The structured, structuring structures that turn the contingent into the necessary and the historical into the obvious.

But if habitus is the answer, then the next question is harder: Can habitus actually be interrupted, or is naming it the most we can hope for? Is there a form of reflexive practice deep enough to reach the level where dispositions operate? Or does the act of naming habitus simply produce a more sophisticated version of the same habitus, one that can describe its own operations while continuing to perform them, one that can say "I recognize my white helper habitus" while the habitus itself remains structurally intact, generating the same felt imperatives, the same assumptions of welcome, the same experience of righteousness that it produced before the naming?

That question cannot be answered theoretically. It can only be answered in practice, if it can be answered at all.

¹ Bourdieu, P. (1977). *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (R. Nice, Trans.). Cambridge University Press; Bourdieu, P. (1990). *The Logic of Practice* (R. Nice, Trans.). Stanford University Press. The concept of habitus appears in both works, but *The Logic of Practice* contains the more developed formulation, particularly in Chapter 3.

² Readers familiar with Bourdieu will note that I am drawing primarily on the anglophone reception of his work, which has its own distortions. The French original carries connotations that "disposition" only partially captures. Wacquant (2005) has written extensively about the mistranslations and misappropriations of Bourdieu in American social science. See Wacquant, L. (2005). *Habitus*. In J. Beckett & Z. Milan (Eds.), *International Encyclopedia of Economic Sociology*, Routledge.

³ Bourdieu, P. (1990). *The Logic of Practice*, p. 53. The full passage is worth quoting at length for readers who want to engage with the concept beyond the summary offered here, but this chapter is not a Bourdieu primer. It is an application.

⁴ Wacquant, L. (2004). *Body and Soul: Notebooks of an Apprentice Boxer*. Oxford University Press. Wacquant's ethnography is unusual in the sociological literature for its sustained attention to the bodily dimension of habitus, which Bourdieu theorized but rarely demonstrated empirically.

⁵ Bourdieu, P. (1977). *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, especially Part II on the relationship between habitus and field.

⁶ The "hero teacher" narrative has been critiqued from multiple directions. See Goldstein, D. (2014). *The Teacher Wars: A History of America's Most Embattled Profession*. Doubleday. The persistence of the narrative despite the critique is itself evidence of the field's capacity to reproduce the dispositions it generates.

⁷ Reay, D. (2004). "It's all becoming a habitus": Beyond the habitual use of habitus in educational research. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 25(4), 431-444.

⁸ Lareau, A. (2011). *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life* (2nd ed.). University of California Press.

⁹ I am not arguing that the Danielson Framework is designed to produce boundary-crossing. I am arguing that evaluation systems that reward flexibility and responsiveness without equally rewarding professional restraint and role clarity create field conditions that generate dispositions toward overextension. The distinction matters.

¹⁰ The literature on racial formation in education is extensive. For a theoretical framework, see Omi, M., & Winant, H. (2014). *Racial Formation in the United States* (3rd ed.). Routledge. For the specific dynamics of whiteness in educational settings, see Leonardo, Z. (2009). *Race, Whiteness, and Education*. Routledge.

CHAPTER 3

Whiteness-as-Property

In 1993, Cheryl Harris published "Whiteness as Property" in the *Harvard Law Review*, a piece that has since been cited thousands of times but rarely applied with the precision it demands.¹ Harris's argument is not metaphorical. It does not suggest that whiteness is *like* property, or that it *functions as if* it were property, or that property provides a *useful analogy* for understanding racial advantage. The claim is stronger than that, and the strength of the claim matters. Whiteness, Harris argues, is property. It has been constructed and enforced as property through American law since the colonial period. It carries specific property interests that courts have recognized, protected, and continue to protect. These interests include the right of disposition, the right of use and enjoyment, the right to reputation and status, and the absolute right of exclusion.² Each of these rights has been exercised, litigated, defended, and expanded in precisely the way that property rights operate in a common law system. And each of these rights, when mapped onto the phenomenon this book calls misdirected agency, reveals something that individual psychology cannot.

The project of this chapter is structural analysis. It asks what happens when Harris's framework is placed alongside the behaviors that earlier chapters have identified: the white educator who inserts herself into community spaces, the helper who escalates when redirected, the ally who converts exclusion into evidence of her own superior commitment. These are not, from a property framework, aberrations. They are exercises of rights.

The right of disposition refers to the owner's capacity to transfer, sell, or otherwise control the terms under which property is accessed.³ In the context of whiteness, disposition functions less as literal sale than as the assumed authority to determine how racial meaning circulates. The white educator who decides that her school needs more "culturally responsive" programming is exercising a disposition right. She is determining what counts as cultural responsiveness, which version of it will be deployed, and under what conditions it will be made available to the community it ostensibly serves. That the community did not request the programming, did not design it, and may actively resist it does not register as a constraint, because disposition is an owner's right.

Harris traces this logic through the history of racial passing, in which light-skinned Black Americans performed whiteness to access economic and social resources.⁴ The performance was not merely social deception. It was, Harris argues, an assumption of property. The passer adopted whiteness as an asset, wielded it for the material advantages it conferred, and understood that exposure would mean the loss of something tangible: employment, housing, social standing, physical safety. The implication runs in both directions. If whiteness can be assumed and lost, it operates within the logic of ownership. And if it operates within the logic of ownership, then the behaviors that white people exhibit when their racial positioning is disrupted are not psychological quirks. They are the responses of owners who perceive that their property is under threat.

This distinction matters for understanding misdirected agency because it relocates the analysis from intention to structure. The question ceases to be "Does the white helper mean well?" and becomes "What property interest is being exercised, and at whose expense?" The first question leads to absolution. The second does not.

The fourth property interest, the right of exclusion, warrants its own consideration because it operates in misdirected agency with particular subtlety. Harris identifies the right to exclude as the most critical property right, the one that makes all others meaningful.²¹ Property that anyone can access is not property in any enforceable sense. Whiteness derives its value precisely from the capacity to determine who is included in its protections and who is not. In contexts of misdirected agency, the right of exclusion manifests as the white educator's capacity to define who counts as a legitimate participant in equity work and on what terms. She determines whose knowledge is relevant, whose voice is credible, whose pain is legible, and whose objections constitute evidence of the problem she has appointed herself to solve. A community member who resists her framing is not exercising legitimate dissent. He is, from the perspective of the property holder, trespassing on territory she has already claimed. The exclusion operates through inclusion: by centering herself as the mediator of equity, she excludes the community from authoring its own terms of engagement while appearing to invite everyone in.

The right of use and enjoyment is the most visible property interest operating within misdirected agency, and the most consistently denied by those who exercise it. Harris describes this right as the capacity to use one's whiteness as a resource, to deploy it in contexts where it confers advantage, and to enjoy the benefits that accrue from its deployment without being required to account for the structural conditions that make those benefits possible.⁵ The white educator who volunteers for the diversity committee, who attends community listening sessions, who speaks publicly about her commitment to equity, is using her whiteness. She is deploying it in a context where it confers specific advantages: credibility with white administrators who perceive her as brave, access to communities of color who may initially read her presence as solidarity, professional distinction in a field that increasingly rewards equity-adjacent labor.

The enjoyment dimension is subtler and more corrosive. It refers not only to the material benefits of deployment but to the affective experience of using whiteness well. The warm feeling of being thanked by a colleague of color. The satisfaction of being identified as "one of the good ones." The pleasure of occupying a position that is simultaneously powerful and morally unassailable. These are not incidental rewards. They are the use-value of whiteness operating within institutions that have been structured to produce exactly this distribution of satisfaction.

Zeus Leonardo's work on the production of white supremacy through everyday institutional practices is instructive here.⁶ Leonardo argues that whiteness does not simply confer privilege passively, as if advantage were distributed by an invisible mechanism that white people merely happen to receive. Rather, white supremacy is actively produced through practices that white people engage in, benefit from, and reproduce, often while articulating sincere opposition to racism. The white educator who uses her position to lead equity work is, from Leonardo's framework, producing the conditions under which whiteness retains its value as property. She is ensuring that equity passes through her, that her whiteness mediates the terms under which racial justice becomes intelligible within her institution. The result is not equity. The result is the enhancement of whiteness as an asset.

Some readers will find this characterization uncharitable. It attributes structural function to actions that may be, and in many cases are, motivated by genuine concern. The white teacher who stays late to help a student of color with college applications, who donates money to causes that serve communities she does not belong to, who reads and assigns books by authors of color, is doing things that are, in isolation, defensible. Perhaps even admirable.

The analysis continues regardless. What Harris's framework reveals is that the defensibility of individual actions is irrelevant to the structural question. Property interests operate whether or not the owner is conscious of exercising them. A homeowner does not need to understand the history of restrictive covenants to benefit from the property value that those covenants produced.⁷ A white educator does not need to understand the history of whiteness-as-property to benefit from the institutional arrangements that make her equity labor

legible, rewarded, and centered. The question is not whether she is conscious of the benefit. The question is whether the benefit exists, who receives it, and what it costs.

The concept of settled expectations appears in Harris's analysis as a mechanism for understanding how property interests become naturalized. Drawing on legal doctrine, Harris argues that whites have come to expect the benefits of whiteness as a matter of right, not privilege. These expectations are "settled" in the legal sense: they have been relied upon so consistently and for so long that disrupting them feels, to those who hold them, like a violation of natural order.⁸ The expectation of being welcome in any space. The expectation of being heard when one speaks. The expectation that one's feelings will be accommodated, one's perspective treated as relevant, one's presence experienced as neutral rather than intrusive. These are not hopes. They are settled expectations, and they carry the force of property.

When misdirected agency is met with resistance, what happens next can be understood through the lens of settled expectations under threat. The community organizer who tells the white volunteer that her presence at the planning meeting is not needed is not offering feedback. She is disrupting a settled expectation. The protocol that limits visible white allyship in spaces where it has historically been centered is not establishing a boundary. It is effecting something that feels, to the white educator, like dispossession. And the response to perceived dispossession is predictable because it follows the logic of property defense: escalation, reassertion, appeal to higher authority, and the framing of the dispossessing party as the aggressor.

This pattern recurs with striking consistency. The white helper who is told that her help is not wanted does not withdraw. She intensifies. She sends longer emails. She requests meetings. She appeals to supervisors. She frames her exclusion as evidence that the organization has lost its way, that the real commitment to equity is being sacrificed for political correctness, that she is being punished for caring too much. Each of these moves is an assertion of property rights. The right to be present. The right to have one's investment honored. The right to determine the terms of one's own participation. The right, ultimately, to exclude others from defining what equity means in spaces where whiteness has always set the terms.

The escalation is not irrational. It is structurally coherent. If whiteness is property, and property rights include the right to exclude, then the white educator who has been excluded from a space she considers hers is experiencing a structural inversion. Someone has exercised an exclusion right against her, and the entire architecture of American property law tells her that this should not be possible. Her response is not overreaction. It is the exercise of a property interest so deeply settled that its disruption registers as violence.

There is a concept that Harris does not name but that her framework makes visible, and that operates with particular force in educational contexts. It can be called white emotional trespass: the assumed right to occupy any space with one's feelings because whiteness grants access everywhere.

The concept draws on Cheryl Matias's extensive work on white emotionality in education.⁹ Matias argues that white teachers deploy specific emotional repertoires, including guilt, shame, anger, fragility, and performative distress, that function simultaneously as shields against confronting racism and as vehicles for maintaining white dominance. These are not simply feelings that white educators happen to have. They are what Matias terms "emotionalities of whiteness," structurally produced affective responses that center white experience while claiming to serve students and communities of color.¹⁰

White emotional trespass extends this analysis by framing the deployment of white emotionality as a property claim. When a white educator cries during a conversation about race, the tears do not simply express feeling. They claim space. They redirect attention. They impose an obligation on everyone present, but particularly on people of color present, to manage, accommodate, and ultimately center the white person's emotional experience. The tears function as a property assertion: the right of use and enjoyment applied to emotional territory. The white educator's feelings are granted entry into every room because whiteness has never been denied entry to any room.

Matias documents this pattern extensively in her research on white teachers in urban schools. White teachers who reported feeling "passionate" about teaching students of color consistently deployed emotional responses that centered their own racial identity rather than their students' educational needs.¹¹ When confronted with evidence of their own racial bias, these teachers responded not with curiosity or analysis but with guilt that demanded absolution, anger that demanded retraction, or tears that demanded comfort. In each case, the emotional response functioned as a reassertion of centrality. The conversation about race became, through the mechanism of white emotionality, a conversation about white people's feelings about race.

The trespass dimension of this concept is important. Trespass, in property law, refers to the unauthorized entry onto another's property. White emotional trespass names the unauthorized entry of white feelings into spaces where they have not been invited and where their presence causes harm. The diversity training session that becomes a processing space for white guilt. The community meeting that becomes an opportunity for white confession. The faculty discussion about racial disparities in discipline data that becomes a forum for white teachers to share how hard it is to be accused of racism. In each case, white feelings cross a boundary that they do not recognize as a boundary because whiteness has never recognized boundaries on its own movement.

The property framework makes the mechanism legible. If whiteness carries the right to be present in any space, and if emotional expression is understood as a dimension of presence, then white emotional trespass is not an abuse of property. It is the exercise of property as designed. The white educator who brings her tears, her guilt, her defensive anger into spaces where communities of color are attempting to do their own work is not violating a norm. She is enacting one. And the norm she is enacting is the norm of whiteness as property: present everywhere, accountable nowhere, protected by settled expectations that have the force of law even when no law is invoked.

Derrick Bell's interest convergence thesis, first articulated in his 1980 analysis of *Brown v. Board of Education*, provides a further structural lens for understanding who benefits from misdirected agency and how those benefits are distributed.¹² Bell's argument, stated plainly, is that racial justice advances for Black Americans occur only when those advances converge with the interests of white Americans. The corollary is equally important: when Black interests and white interests diverge, white interests prevail. This is not a claim about individual intentions. It is a claim about structural dynamics, and it has been substantiated repeatedly across decades of legal and social analysis.¹³

Applied to misdirected agency, interest convergence asks a question that is both simple and destabilizing: who benefits? The white educator who volunteers for equity work benefits from moral capital. She is seen as caring, courageous, committed. She receives professional recognition, social approval from peers who share her racial positioning, and the internal satisfaction of being on the right side of history. These benefits are real, material, and cumulative. They accrue to her professional reputation, her sense of self, her standing within an institution that rewards equity-adjacent labor.

The costs are distributed differently. They fall on the communities she claims to serve. The community organizer who must now manage a white volunteer's feelings in addition to the actual work of organizing. The students of color who must perform gratitude for help they did not request and may not need. The colleagues of color who must spend political capital correcting the white educator's mistakes, repairing the relationships she has damaged, and explaining, again, why good intentions do not produce good outcomes. These costs are also real, material, and cumulative. They deplete the very resources, time, energy, trust, institutional credibility, that communities of color need to pursue their own interests.

The convergence, such as it is, operates like this: the white educator's participation in equity work is tolerated, even welcomed, to the extent that it serves institutional interests in appearing committed to diversity. Her presence allows the institution to demonstrate visible engagement without redistributing resources or power. The institution benefits. The white educator benefits. The community absorbs the cost. When the community resists, when it says "not like this" or "not through you" or simply "no," the convergence breaks. And when it breaks, the institution sides with the white educator, because her continued participation serves the institution's interest in maintaining the appearance of progress. The community's refusal to perform gratitude is reframed as hostility, as evidence of the very dysfunction that justifies continued white intervention.

There is a further dimension of interest convergence that operates specifically within misdirected agency and that Bell's original formulation anticipates without naming directly. When the white educator's equity labor is challenged, she does not simply lose professional standing. She loses the moral identity that the labor has constructed for her. This is not a minor loss. In a social context where racism is publicly condemned, the white person who can credibly claim active antiracist commitment holds an asset of considerable value. That asset

distinguishes her from other white people, insulates her from the collective shame that attaches to whiteness in progressive spaces, and positions her as an exception to patterns she can identify in everyone except herself. The convergence, then, is not merely between her interests and the institution's interests. It is between her moral self-concept and the continuation of racial inequality in forms that require her particular kind of intervention. She needs the problem to persist in ways that demand her specific contribution. If the community could solve its own problems, her asset would lose its value.

Bell would not be surprised by any of this. The structure is doing exactly what the structure was built to do.

There is a complication that must be named, not because it softens the analysis but because intellectual precision requires it. Timothy Lensmire and colleagues, in a 2013 article that resists the reduction of white identity to a simple exercise of privilege, argue that the white subject is more complex, more conflicted, and more internally contradictory than most critical race analyses allow.¹⁴ The white educator who enacts misdirected agency is not merely exercising property rights. She is also enacting a complex identity formation that includes genuine care, real distress, historically produced dispositions, and structural positioning she may not fully understand. She is, in Lensmire's terms, "learning to be white" in a context where the available scripts for white racial identity are limited, contradictory, and saturated with both dominance and discomfort.¹⁵

This complication does not exonerate. Lensmire and his coauthors are explicit on this point: acknowledging the complexity of white identity formation is not an argument for sympathy, patience, or reduced accountability.¹⁶ It is an argument for more precise analysis. If misdirected agency is understood as simple privilege exercise, the intervention is simple: make white educators aware of their privilege and they will stop exercising it. This has been the dominant approach in diversity training for three decades, and three decades of evidence suggest that it does not work.¹⁷ Awareness of privilege does not, by itself, produce different behavior. It often produces more sophisticated versions of the same behavior, now wrapped in the language of acknowledgment.

The reason is structural, and the evidence for this structural claim is not limited to anecdote. Studies of diversity training across industries consistently find that awareness-based interventions produce attitudinal change that does not translate into behavioral change, and in some cases produce backlash effects that leave participants more resistant to equity measures than they were before the training began.²² The white educator who completes a privilege walk, who reads McIntosh's invisible knapsack essay, who can enumerate the ways in which her skin color has conferred advantage, has gained knowledge. She has not lost property. The property interests remain intact, the settled expectations remain settled, and the institutional structures that reward her centrality remain unchanged. Knowledge, in this context, is not power. It is decoration.

Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus provides the theoretical architecture for understanding why. Habitus refers to the set of durable, transposable dispositions through which individuals perceive, judge, and act in the social world.¹⁸ These dispositions are not conscious. They are not chosen. They are produced through sustained exposure to specific social conditions, and they operate below the level of deliberate intention. A habitus of whiteness, then, is not a set of beliefs that a white person holds about race. It is a set of embodied dispositions that organize perception, judgment, and action in ways that reproduce racial hierarchy whether or not the person intends to reproduce it. The white educator who sees a struggling student of color and immediately moves to help is not making a conscious decision to exercise white saviorism. She is enacting a disposition that has been produced by decades of exposure to institutions, narratives, relationships, and reward structures that position white help as natural, necessary, and good.

Bourdieu is famously pessimistic about the possibility of transforming habitus through reflexive awareness alone.¹⁹ The dispositions that constitute habitus are not stored in consciousness where reflection could access and modify them. They are stored in the body, in the patterns of perception and response that operate before conscious thought intervenes. A white educator can attend a workshop on white saviorism, read every relevant text, articulate a sophisticated critique of her own positioning, and still, in the moment when a student needs something, enact the disposition that the workshop was designed to disrupt. This is not hypocrisy. It is the operation of habitus. The disposition is older, deeper, and more durable than the critique.

If misdirected agency is habitus, then intervention must reach deeper than consciousness. It must alter the conditions that produce the disposition, not merely the beliefs that accompany it. This means changing institutional structures: who is hired, who is promoted, who defines competence, who controls resources, who is centered in professional development, who is permitted to set the terms of engagement with communities of color. It means changing the material conditions under which white educators form their professional identities, not simply asking them to reflect on identities already formed.

This is a structural demand, and it is a demand that most institutions are not prepared to meet because meeting it would require redistributing the very property interests that Harris identifies. It would require white educators to relinquish settled expectations: the expectation of access, of centrality, of emotional accommodation, of being seen as good. It would require institutions to stop rewarding equity-adjacent labor that centers whiteness and start redistributing actual resources to communities that have been structurally dispossessed. It would require, in short, a transfer of property. And property, as any first-year law student can tell you, is not surrendered voluntarily.

The architecture of misdirected agency is now visible in structural terms. A white educator arrives at a school or community with dispositions produced by a habitus of whiteness. She exercises property rights, the right of use and enjoyment, the right of disposition, the right to be present, that she does not experience as property

rights because they have been settled so long that they feel like nature. She deploys emotionalities of whiteness that claim space, redirect attention, and impose obligations on people of color to manage her experience. She accumulates moral capital through equity-adjacent labor while the costs of her participation are absorbed by the communities she claims to serve. When she is redirected, she experiences the redirection as dispossession and responds with the escalation that property defense requires. The institution supports her because her continued participation serves its interest in maintaining the appearance of progress.

At every point in this sequence, the white educator may be, and in many cases is, genuinely motivated by care. She may be experiencing real distress at the conditions she observes. She may be willing to sacrifice time, comfort, professional standing, and personal relationships in pursuit of what she understands as justice. None of this matters to the structural analysis. The question is not what she feels. The question is what her actions produce, who benefits from the production, and who pays.

Harris's framework does not leave room for the defense of good intentions because property law does not leave room for the defense of good intentions. A homeowner who builds a fence on her neighbor's land does not get to keep the fence because she believed the property line was elsewhere.²⁰ The encroachment is the encroachment regardless of the encroacher's state of mind. If whiteness is property, and if misdirected agency is the exercise of property rights in spaces where those rights have been challenged, then the good intentions of the person exercising those rights are legally, structurally, and ethically irrelevant.

This produces a problem that the chapter will not resolve, because resolving it would require the kind of structural transformation that the chapter has identified as unlikely. The problem is this: the very dispositions that produce misdirected agency are also the dispositions that produce the white educator's sense of herself as a moral agent. Her identity, her professional purpose, her understanding of what it means to do good work in a world marked by racial injustice, all of these are structured by the same habitus that generates the behavior she is being asked to change. To relinquish misdirected agency is not simply to stop doing certain things. It is to surrender a version of the self that feels, to the person inhabiting it, like the only self available.

And the structure is not asking her to do this. The structure is rewarding her for not doing it.

¹ Cheryl I. Harris, "Whiteness as Property," *Harvard Law Review* 106, no. 8 (1993): 1707-1791.

² Harris, "Whiteness as Property," 1731-1737.

³ Harris, "Whiteness as Property," 1731.

⁴ Harris, "Whiteness as Property," 1710-1714.

⁵ Harris, "Whiteness as Property," 1734.

⁶ Zeus Leonardo, *Race, Whiteness, and Education* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 75-94.

⁷ Richard Rothstein, *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America* (New York: Liveright, 2017), 77-91.

⁸ Harris, "Whiteness as Property," 1731.

⁹ Cheryl E. Matias, *Feeling White: Whiteness, Emotionality, and Education* (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2016).

¹⁰ Matias, *Feeling White*, 23-41.

¹¹ Matias, *Feeling White*, 67-89.

CHAPTER 4

White Emotional Trespass

The meeting was supposed to start at six thirty. By six fifteen, the community room at Ridgewood Elementary was already full. Metal folding chairs arranged in concentric rows, the kind that pinch your thighs if you sit too long. Fluorescent lights humming that particular frequency that makes everything look slightly clinical. Someone had set out coffee in styrofoam cups and a plate of cookies from the grocery store, the kind with pink frosting that nobody actually wants but everybody takes because they are there.

Mrs. Reyes had arrived at five fifty. She sat in the second row, purse on her lap, phone in her hand, scrolling through a text thread with her sister-in-law in El Paso. She had come for one reason. The district had promised that tonight's meeting would include a representative from a legal aid organization who could answer questions about the new enforcement protocols and what they meant for families with mixed immigration status. Her husband had not come. They had discussed it and decided one of them should stay home with the children, and that she would be the one to go because her English was stronger and because, if she was being honest with herself, she was less afraid. Not unafraid. Less afraid.

Around her, the room filled with families she recognized from pickup and drop-off. The Nguyen family, who ran the nail salon on Prospect. Mr. and Mrs. Okafor, whose son played soccer with her youngest. A cluster of Somali mothers she knew by sight but not by name, sitting together near the back, one of them translating quietly for another. These were people who had come for information. Specific, practical, usable information. They had arranged childcare or brought their children. They had driven here after work or taken buses. They had come because the district had said: we will help you understand your rights.

Beth Halloran sat in the front row. She was the school counselor at Ridgewood, a position she had held for eleven years. She was white, mid-forties, with a master's degree in school counseling from a state university and a genuine, documentable history of caring about her students. She had organized food drives. She had spent her own money on winter coats. She had cried at graduation ceremonies for students she had shepherded through rough years, and those tears had been real. None of what happened next requires us to doubt that Beth Halloran cared about children. That is precisely what makes it worth examining.

The meeting opened with brief remarks from the principal, Dr. Simmons, who was Black and who kept his comments to four minutes. He introduced the legal aid representative, a young attorney named Marcos Rivera, who had driven an hour to be here and who had a stack of printed resource sheets in English, Spanish, and Somali. Rivera stood, adjusted the microphone, and began explaining the difference between a judicial warrant and an administrative warrant in plain, careful language. He was two minutes into his explanation when Beth Halloran raised her hand.

"I just need to say something," she said. Her voice was already breaking. "I am so sorry. I am so, so sorry that this is happening to our families."

Rivera paused. Dr. Simmons shifted in his seat. Mrs. Reyes watched Beth Halloran's face crumple and felt something tighten in her chest that was not sympathy.

"I want you all to know," Beth continued, standing now, turning to face the room rather than the presenter, "that I see you. I see your pain. And I want you to know that I will do everything in my power to protect your children. Every single one of them. Because they are MY kids too."

She was crying openly now. A white teacher in the third row reached over and squeezed her arm. Someone murmured something supportive. The room reorganized itself around Beth Halloran's grief, the way rooms do, the way they always do, because white tears have a gravitational pull that bends the trajectory of every conversation they enter. Rivera stood at the front with his microphone and his resource sheets and waited. The Somali mother who had been translating stopped mid-sentence. Mr. Okafor looked at his wife. Mrs. Reyes looked at her phone. It was six forty-one. The legal aid attorney had been allowed to speak for two minutes before the room became about Beth.

"I lay awake last night," Beth said, "just thinking about what you must be going through. And I know I can never fully understand, but I want you to know that my heart is breaking."

Mrs. Reyes did not need Beth Halloran's heart to break. She needed to know whether ICE could enter a school building. She needed to know what documentation to keep in her glove compartment. She needed the attorney to finish his sentence about administrative warrants. What she got instead was a woman she liked well enough, a woman who had been kind to her children, standing in front of a room full of frightened people and asking them to hold her feelings.

Nobody asked Beth to sit down. Nobody ever does.

I have watched this scene, or versions of it, play out more times than I can count. In faculty meetings after a racist incident. In community forums after a police shooting. In professional development sessions where the topic turns to equity and a white participant's emotional response becomes the event's center of gravity. I have watched it, and I have done it, and I am writing about it now with the particular frustration of someone who recognizes the pattern from the inside.

White emotional trespass is not a phrase I invented. The conceptual architecture comes from Cheryl Matias, whose work on the emotionalities of whiteness remains one of the most precise analytical tools we have for understanding how white feelings function in racialized spaces.¹ What Matias identifies is not merely that white people have emotional responses to racial injustice. Of course they do. The question is what those emotions do, where they go, and whose needs they serve when they arrive.

The term I am using, "trespass," is deliberate. Trespass means entering a space where you have not been invited. It means crossing a boundary that exists for a reason. It means assuming that your presence is welcome, or that the question of welcome is irrelevant, because you have the right to be anywhere you choose. This is the emotional analogue of what Cheryl Harris described as whiteness functioning as property: the assumed right to access, to use, to occupy.² When that right extends to emotional space, when white people assume that their feelings about racism belong in every room where racism is being discussed, what we get is not solidarity. What we get is trespass.

I want to be precise about the mechanism because precision matters here, and because the lack of precision is part of how the pattern reproduces itself. The mechanism operates in four linked steps, each one building on the last, each one feeling so natural to the person enacting it that questioning any single step seems unreasonable.

Step one: emotional activation. A crisis affecting communities of color triggers a genuine emotional response in a white person. This response is real. I am not questioning its authenticity. Beth Halloran's tears were not performative in the sense that she was faking them. She felt what she felt.

Step two: the default assumption of belonging. The white person assumes, without conscious deliberation, that their emotional response belongs in the space where the crisis is being addressed. This assumption is so

deeply embedded in the architecture of whiteness that it does not register as an assumption at all. It feels like a fact. Of course my feelings belong here. I care. I am part of this community. Why would I not share what I am feeling?

Step three: the assumption of accommodation. Having entered the space with their emotions, the white person assumes, again without conscious deliberation, that those emotions require accommodation. That the room should pause. That others should witness. That comfort should be offered. And accommodation comes, because the social consequences of failing to accommodate white distress are well understood by everyone in the room, especially the people of color who have been navigating those consequences their entire lives.

Step four: the assumption of precedence. The white person's emotional needs take priority over the original purpose of the gathering. The attorney stops talking. The resource sheets stay in their stack. The practical information that families drove across town to receive gets deferred, because the room is now organized around a different task: managing a white woman's grief about racism.

Each step feels reasonable in isolation. Together, they constitute a seizure. The seizure of space, time, attention, and emotional resources from the people who needed that space most.

Matias names five "emotionalities of whiteness" that circulate through these moments: guilt, shame, anger, defensiveness, and denial.³ What makes her analysis so useful is the observation that these emotions do not merely reflect white people's inner states. They function. They do work in the world. And the work they do, regardless of the intention behind them, is the work of maintaining white dominance in spaces that were supposed to be organized around something else.

Guilt says: I feel terrible about this, which means I am one of the good ones, which means you should trust me, which means my presence here is not part of the problem. Shame says: I cannot bear to look at this directly, so let us focus on my discomfort instead of the structural conditions that produced it. Anger says: I am outraged on your behalf, which means I am your ally, which means my emotional response is a form of action. Defensiveness says: if you question my response, you are questioning my character, and I will not tolerate that. Denial says: this is not really about race, and by insisting that it is, you are the one creating division.

These emotions function as both shields and vehicles. As shields, they protect white people from the discomfort of genuine engagement with their own complicity. If I am busy feeling guilty, I do not have to examine what I have materially benefited from. If I am busy being angry, I do not have to sit with the more difficult question of what I am willing to give up. As vehicles, they carry white people into spaces where their presence was not requested, granting them access to conversations, to decision-making, to the emotional lives of people of color, in ways that reinforce rather than disrupt existing power arrangements.

The shields work. That is the problem. They work beautifully. They work so well that the person deploying them, and I use "deploying" knowing that it implies an intentionality that is often absent, genuinely cannot see what is happening. Beth Halloran did not walk into that meeting planning to hijack it. She walked in caring about children, which she does, and feeling scared for families she knows, which she was, and when the moment came, her emotions did what white emotions in racialized spaces have been trained to do. They expanded. They took up room. They demanded witness.

And the room gave witness, because what else could it do?

I need to say something here that I do not enjoy saying. I have been Beth Halloran. Not in that specific meeting, not with those specific families, but in rooms where my white emotional response to racial injustice became the thing the room had to manage. I have cried in spaces where my tears consumed oxygen that belonged to someone else. I have declared solidarity in moments when what was needed was not my solidarity but my silence. I have assumed that my feelings about racism were relevant to every conversation about racism, because I am a person who cares, and caring people share their feelings, and sharing feelings is how we build community. Every sentence in that chain of logic felt true. The conclusion it produced was a form of theft.

This is not a confession designed to inoculate me against critique. The "I have done this too" move can itself become a form of trespass, a way of centering my journey of self-awareness in a chapter that is supposed to be about the impact on communities of color. I name my own participation in the pattern because intellectual honesty requires it and because the pattern's persistence depends in part on the fiction that it is enacted only by people who have not done the reading. I have done the reading. I have assigned the reading. I have discussed the reading in seminars and workshops and conference presentations. And I have still walked into rooms and let my white feelings take up space that was not mine to fill.

We have known about this pattern. Matias published her foundational work in 2016. DiAngelo named white fragility in 2011.⁴ Leonardo was writing about the possessive investment in white emotionality in 2009.⁵ The scholarship is not obscure. It is not contested in any serious way. It is taught in graduate programs across the country. And the pattern persists. It persists in schools led by people who can cite DiAngelo from memory. It persists in districts that have invested millions in equity training. It persists because knowing about a pattern and interrupting a pattern are not the same thing, and the distance between those two is the distance this entire book is trying to map.

Here is why I am frustrated. Not annoyed. Not mildly irritated. Frustrated in the way that builds pressure behind your eyes and makes your sentences shorter than you intended.

I am frustrated because white emotional trespass costs people things. Real things. Measurable things. In the vignette I opened with, the cost was specific: Mrs. Reyes did not get the legal information she came for

during the time that was allocated for it. The attorney's presentation was shortened. The resource sheets were distributed in a rush at the end. Some families had already left because their babysitter could only stay until seven thirty and the meeting ran long because twenty minutes were spent processing Beth Halloran's emotional response. Those twenty minutes were not empty time. They were time that belonged to families who needed it, and they were taken, not maliciously, not strategically, but taken all the same.

I am frustrated because the cost is always borne by the same people. White emotional trespass does not inconvenience other white people. They accommodate it reflexively, often with warmth, because the social scripts for comforting a crying white woman are deeply embedded and instantly available. The people who pay the cost are the people of color in the room whose needs get deferred, whose time gets consumed, whose emotional labor gets extracted because they are now expected to reassure the white person that they are not angry, that they appreciate the support, that the tears are welcome. The extraction is relentless and it is invisible to the person doing the extracting because, from their vantage point, they are not extracting anything. They are giving. They are offering their heart.

I am frustrated because the pattern disguises itself as care, and care is the one thing you are not allowed to question in education. Who could object to a counselor who loves her students? Who could criticize a woman who is crying because she is worried about children? The answer is: anyone who notices that the crying is not helping the children. Anyone who notices that the worry, however genuine, has been metabolized into a performance that serves the performer. Anyone who asks the simple question that the room will not ask because asking it feels cruel: whose needs are being met right now?

That question, "whose needs are being met right now," is the question that white emotional trespass makes impossible to ask in real time. This is perhaps its most effective function. By flooding the room with affect, the trespass creates conditions under which any analytical response looks cold, any boundary-setting looks heartless, and any attempt to redirect the conversation back to its original purpose looks like you are the one who does not care about children. The emotional display generates its own immunity from critique. Try telling a crying person that their crying is a problem. Try it in a room full of people who have already organized themselves around comforting that person. You will be the villain. Every time.

There is a tangent I want to pursue here because I think it matters, even though it pulls us away from the central argument for a moment.

Why does this pattern persist despite being named?

I have sat with this question for years. The easy answer is that naming a pattern does not automatically give people the tools to interrupt it, which is true but insufficient. The deeper answer, I think, has to do with the relationship between knowledge and identity.

When white educators learn about white emotional trespass, or white fragility, or any of the patterns described in the critical whiteness literature, they are learning about something that threatens their self-concept. And the specific threat is this: the possibility that their caring, which is the foundation of their professional identity, might function as a form of harm. Not instead of care. Alongside it. The care and the harm, braided together so tightly that separating them requires a kind of self-examination that is genuinely painful.

Most people, when confronted with that possibility, do one of two things. They reject it outright, which produces the defensive fragility that DiAngelo has documented so thoroughly.⁴⁴ Or they accept it intellectually while maintaining their behavioral patterns, which produces the more insidious phenomenon of the "woke" white educator who can name the pattern while enacting it. The second response is, in some ways, more damaging than the first, because it creates the illusion of transformation without the substance. The language changes. The behavior does not.

What would actual interruption look like? In the meeting I described, it would have looked like Beth Halloran feeling her feelings, recognizing them as hers to process, and choosing not to make them the room's business. It would have looked like her sitting in the second row, crying quietly if she needed to cry, and letting the attorney finish his presentation. It would have looked like her approaching Mrs. Reyes after the meeting, not to declare solidarity, but to ask: did you get what you needed tonight? Can I help you connect with the legal aid office this week?

That version of Beth Halloran is not less caring. She is more disciplined. She has learned to distinguish between emotional expression and emotional service, between feeling something and making other people responsible for what she feels. She has learned, in the language of this book, to recognize the difference between agency directed at her own needs and agency directed at the needs of the community she serves.

But that Beth Halloran is also rarer than she should be, and the reason she is rare is not that white educators are uniquely selfish or uniquely fragile. The reason is that the entire architecture of whiteness, the social scripts, the institutional norms, the cultural expectations about emotional expression and community and care, all of it trains white people to experience their feelings as universally relevant. As automatically deserving of space. As inherently valuable to whatever conversation is happening. Interrupting that training is not a matter of reading a book or attending a workshop. It is a matter of rebuilding the internal architecture that determines what feels natural, what feels right, what feels like the obvious thing to do when you are a person who cares and the world is doing something terrible.

Let me return to the analytical frame. White emotional trespass operates through what I am calling the care-to-seizure pipeline, and I want to map its stages with some rigor because the mapping itself is part of the interruption.

The pipeline begins with a legitimate emotional response to injustice. This is not the problem. The capacity to feel outrage or grief or fear in response to the suffering of others is not pathological. It is human. The pipeline becomes problematic at the moment when the emotional response converts into action without passing through the filter of positional awareness. Positional awareness asks: where am I in this situation? Whose crisis is this? What is my role? What does this community need from me right now, and is what I am about to do responsive to that need or responsive to my own need to be seen as responsive?

These questions are not complicated. They are uncomfortable, which is different. They are uncomfortable because they require the white person to consider the possibility that their most generous impulse, the impulse to show up and be present and share their heart, might not be what is needed. Might, in fact, be the opposite of what is needed. The discomfort of that consideration is real, and I do not minimize it. But the cost of avoiding it is borne by other people, and that asymmetry is the ethical core of this chapter.

Matias makes the point that white emotionality in racialized spaces functions as a form of what she calls "emotional currency."¹ White tears buy things. They buy absolution. They buy the right to remain in the conversation. They buy the presumption of good intentions. They buy exemption from the harder questions about complicity and benefit. The transaction is so deeply naturalized that calling it a transaction at all sounds cynical, sounds like you are accusing someone of strategic manipulation when what they are doing is just feeling their feelings.

But currency does not require conscious deployment to function as currency. A dollar bill does not know it is money. It functions as money because of the system in which it circulates. White tears function as emotional currency because of the system of racial meaning-making in which they circulate, a system that assigns white emotions a particular weight, a particular urgency, a particular claim on collective attention. The individual white person crying in the meeting does not have to understand any of this for the mechanism to operate. The mechanism operates through her. It uses her sincerity as its vehicle. It uses her care as its cover.

This is what makes the pattern so resistant to interruption. You cannot interrupt it by questioning the person's sincerity, because the sincerity is real. You cannot interrupt it by questioning their care, because the care is real. You can only interrupt it by questioning the system that converts sincere care into spatial seizure, and that questioning requires a kind of structural analysis that is almost impossible to perform in real time, in a room full of people, with someone crying in front of you.

There is a particular cruelty in the way trespass redistributes labor. The people of color in the room, the ones whose crisis sparked the meeting in the first place, now have additional work to do. They must manage the white person's emotions. They must reassure. They must perform gratitude for the solidarity being offered, even when the solidarity is consuming the resources they came to access. They must do this while also managing their own fear, their own uncertainty, their own need for the practical information that is not being

delivered because the room has been reorganized around someone else's feelings.

This redistribution of labor is not incidental to the trespass. It is the trespass. The moment the room shifts from serving the needs of families in crisis to managing the emotional state of a white staff member, a transfer has occurred. Attention, time, and emotional energy have moved from the people who needed them to the person who needed them less. And the transfer happened not through force or coercion but through the soft, irresistible gravity of white distress.

Leonardo's work on the "possessive investment in white emotionality" is useful here.⁵⁵ Leonardo argues that white people's emotional responses to racial discourse are not merely personal experiences but political acts that function to maintain existing power arrangements. When a white person's grief about racism takes up space in a room organized around addressing racism's material effects, the grief performs a political function regardless of the griever's intentions. It centers whiteness. It demands accommodation. It converts a space designed for the needs of communities of color into a space organized around white feelings about those communities' suffering.

The political function does not require political intent. I keep returning to this point because I think it is the point that white educators most need to hear and most resist hearing. You do not have to be trying to center yourself for your behavior to center yourself. You do not have to be strategically deploying your tears for your tears to function as a deployment. The structure does the work. Your sincerity is the structure's favorite raw material.

I want to address, briefly, the objection that always comes. The objection goes: are you saying white people should not have feelings about racism? Are you saying we should not care? Are you saying we should be cold and detached while terrible things happen to children we love?

No. I am saying something more specific and more demanding than any of that.

I am saying that having feelings and putting them on display in spaces where other people's material needs are at stake are two different things. I am saying that caring about children and processing your care in a way that takes resources from those children's families are two different things. I am saying that the question is not whether you feel but what you do with what you feel, and specifically, whether what you do with what you feel serves the people you say you are feeling it for.

This distinction, between having emotions and deploying them, is the distinction that white emotional trespass collapses. It collapses it because whiteness has trained its subjects to experience the distinction as false. For a white person, particularly a white woman in a caregiving profession, the idea that expressing emotion could be a form of harm is almost literally unthinkable. It contradicts everything they have been taught about authenticity, vulnerability, connection, and care. It contradicts the professional culture of counseling and

education, which valorizes emotional openness and treats emotional suppression as pathological. It contradicts their lived experience of being rewarded, personally and professionally, for being emotionally available.

All of those contradictions are real. They are also insufficient as defenses. The fact that the broader culture rewards white emotional expression does not mean that white emotional expression is universally beneficial. It means the broader culture is organized around white comfort, which is the problem, not the justification.

I return to the meeting room at Ridgewood Elementary, not to the vignette itself but to what happened after. Because what happened after is what always happens after. Beth Halloran was comforted by colleagues. She was told she was brave. She was told her response showed how much she cared. On the drive home, she probably felt both drained and validated, the way you feel after an emotional experience that the people around you have affirmed as meaningful. She probably did not think about the twenty minutes of legal information that did not get delivered. She probably did not think about Mrs. Reyes.

Mrs. Reyes drove home too. She had gotten some of the information she needed, but not all of it. The attorney had been rushed at the end. She had picked up a resource sheet but had not been able to ask her specific question about school enrollment documentation because the Q&A session had been shortened. She would need to call the legal aid office during business hours, which meant taking time off work, which meant losing wages, which is its own cascade of consequences that began, in part, because a well-meaning white woman could not sit with her own feelings for an hour.

I am not constructing Mrs. Reyes as a victim. She is a woman with agency, with her own analysis of what happened in that room, with her own decision-making about how to respond. She may have been angry. She may have been resigned. She may have found it darkly funny, the way you find things funny when you have seen them so many times that outrage becomes a luxury you cannot afford. What she was not, in that room or in my rendering of her, was a teaching moment for Beth Halloran. Her experience does not exist to catalyze white growth. Her experience exists because it is hers, and it was shaped by forces she did not create and should not have to educate anyone about.

This chapter does not end with resolution. It does not end with Beth Halloran learning a lesson or Mrs. Reyes finding peace or the district implementing a protocol that prevents future trespass. It ends with frustration, because frustration is the honest response to a pattern that persists despite everything we know about it.

We have known about white emotional trespass. We have researched it, theorized it, published articles about it, designed workshops to address it, and written book chapters analyzing its mechanisms with, I hope, some rigor. We have named the emotionalities of whiteness and mapped their functions. We have identified the care-to-seizure pipeline and described its stages. We have done the intellectual work. And in meeting rooms and faculty lounges and community forums across the country, tonight, a white educator will stand up and cry

CHAPTER 5

Self-Efficacy and the Service Trap

In 1977, Albert Bandura published what would become one of the most cited papers in the history of psychology. "Self-efficacy: Toward a Unifying Theory of Behavioral Change" proposed a deceptively simple claim: that a person's belief in their capacity to execute specific behaviors determines whether they will attempt those behaviors at all, how much effort they will expend, and how long they will persist when results disappoint.¹ Two decades later, Bandura expanded this framework into a comprehensive theory of human agency, emphasizing a point that the popular uptake of his work had largely flattened: self-efficacy is domain-specific.² A person does not possess a single, transferable reservoir of confidence. Instead, efficacy beliefs are calibrated to particular contexts, tasks, and types of performance. A surgeon who operates with extraordinary confidence may be paralyzed by the prospect of public speaking. An athlete who trusts her body completely on the court may distrust her capacity to comfort a grieving friend. Bandura's data showed this pattern repeatedly. Self-efficacy does not generalize well across domains, and the research base supporting this claim is not ambiguous.³

This finding has been replicated extensively in educational research. Tschannen-Moran and Woolfolk Hoy (2001) developed what remains the standard measure of teacher self-efficacy, and their work confirmed Bandura's domain-specificity thesis in granular detail.⁴ Teacher efficacy operates across at least three distinct dimensions: efficacy for instructional strategies, efficacy for classroom management, and efficacy for student engagement. A teacher who scores high on instructional strategy efficacy may score low on classroom management efficacy. These are not personality traits. They are context-dependent beliefs, built from mastery experiences, vicarious learning, verbal persuasion, and physiological arousal within specific domains of practice.^{4,5} The implications are concrete. A teacher who has spent fifteen years developing confidence in her ability to explain complex texts to reluctant readers has built that efficacy through thousands of hours of domain-specific practice. That confidence is real. It is also bounded.

The boundary matters because crisis does not respect it.

When community disruption enters a school, when immigration enforcement actions generate fear among students and families, when political violence or police brutality or housing instability tears through the lives of children in a classroom, something happens to the psychological economy of the adults in the building. The disruption activates emotional responses that are immediate, powerful, and not subject to rational override. The teacher feels urgency. The counselor feels urgency. The principal feels urgency. Something must be done. The emotional activation is genuine, and in many cases it reflects real moral commitment. These are people who entered education because they care about children.

But the domain in which the crisis operates is not the domain in which the educator holds competence.

This is the efficacy gap: the distance between emotional activation ("I need to do something") and domain-specific capacity ("I don't know what to do here"). The gap is not a character flaw. It is a structural feature of specialization. The teacher has spent her career developing efficacy in curriculum design, in reading intervention, in classroom discussion facilitation. She has not spent her career developing efficacy in immigration law, community organizing, crisis counseling, legal advocacy, or the specific relational practices that communities under threat have developed over generations to protect their members. The emotional activation is high. The domain-specific competence is low. And the interval between those two conditions produces a predictable psychological response.

Compensatory action.

The Mechanics of Displacement

Compensatory action is not a clinical term, and this chapter is not offering a diagnosis. The concept is descriptive: when people experience high emotional activation in a domain where they lack efficacy, they tend to deploy competencies from domains where they do hold efficacy, even when the fit is poor. The action feels productive because it activates existing mastery. The person is doing something they know how to do. The neurological reward circuitry does not distinguish between appropriate deployment and displaced deployment. It registers competence, and

competence feels good.

Consider the structure of the letter-writing example that has threaded through earlier chapters. A teacher, distressed by the threat of immigration enforcement in her community, drafts a formal letter to the local ICE field office. She is exercising a competency she holds at a high level: the ability to construct a persuasive written argument. She knows how to organize evidence, how to modulate tone, how to address an audience. These are skills she has practiced for years in the context of curriculum development, parent communication, and professional correspondence. The act of drafting the letter activates these well-worn neural pathways. She feels like she is doing something.

But the domain is federal immigration enforcement. The audience is not a parent, a colleague, or a school board member. The audience is an agency operating under statutory authority, with enforcement priorities set by executive order, staffed by officers whose training and institutional incentives bear no resemblance to the communicative norms of education. The letter will not change enforcement priorities. It may, depending on its content, create documentation that complicates the legal situation of the families it intends to protect. At minimum, it redirects the teacher's time, emotional energy, and institutional credibility away from actions that might actually serve her students.

The point is not that the teacher is foolish. The point is that the displacement is psychologically predictable. Bandura's framework explains it cleanly: in the absence of domain-specific efficacy, people default to the competencies they possess.^{2,3} This is not a moral failing. It is a feature of how self-efficacy operates in human cognition.

But the clean explanation risks its own kind of displacement. Bandura's theory operates within a positivist epistemological framework. It assumes measurable constructs, causal mechanisms, individual-level analysis. It has extraordinary explanatory power for individual behavior. What it does not do, and was never designed to do, is account for the structural conditions that determine who develops efficacy in which domains, whose emotional activation is treated as legitimate concern versus pathology, and whose compensatory actions carry institutional weight. For that, different analytical tools are required. The question of whether those tools can be productively combined with Bandura's framework, or whether the combination introduces more confusion than clarity, is one this chapter will hold without resolving.

Secondary Traumatic Stress and the Urgency Response

The efficacy gap explains the direction of compensatory action. It does not fully explain the intensity. For that, a second body of research is relevant.

Charles Figley introduced the concept of secondary traumatic stress (STS) in 1995, defining it as "the natural consequent behaviors and emotions resulting from knowing about a traumatizing event experienced by a significant other" and "the stress resulting from helping or wanting to help a traumatized or suffering person."⁶ Figley's initial work focused on therapists and first responders, but subsequent research has extended the framework to educators, social workers, clergy, and others whose professional roles involve sustained exposure to the suffering of others.^{7,8} Beth Hudnall Stamm's (2010) Professional Quality of Life measure operationalized the distinction between compassion satisfaction, burnout, and secondary traumatic stress, providing a widely used instrument for assessing the specific emotional residue of vicarious trauma exposure.⁹

The symptom profile of secondary traumatic stress overlaps significantly with post-traumatic stress disorder: intrusive thoughts, hyperarousal, avoidance behaviors, difficulty concentrating, sleep disruption, irritability.^{6,7} One symptom deserves particular attention in the context of misdirected agency: hyperarousal. The hyperaroused state is characterized by a heightened startle response, difficulty tolerating inaction, a sense that something must be done immediately, and impaired capacity for the kind of deliberative reasoning that distinguishes effective crisis response from reactive behavior.^{6,9} These are recognizable symptoms. They are not character flaws.

When educators are exposed to the trauma of their students and communities, when they hear stories of family separation, witness the fear in a child's eyes, learn about ICE operations in their neighborhoods, the conditions for secondary traumatic stress are present. And the hyperarousal that follows does not announce itself as a symptom. It announces itself as moral clarity. The teacher experiencing STS-related hyperarousal does not think, "I am having a trauma response." She thinks, "I am the only one who cares enough to act." The urgency feels like conviction. The difficulty tolerating inaction feels like courage. The impaired deliberative reasoning feels like cutting through bureaucratic caution.

This is not a debunking. The emotional response is real. The concern for students is real. The threat to communities is real. But the neurological state in which the response occurs shapes the quality of the action that follows, and hyperarousal systematically degrades the capacity for the kind of careful, context-sensitive, relationally grounded action that community crisis demands.

Figley (2002) updated his framework to emphasize that secondary traumatic stress is not a sign of professional weakness but a predictable occupational hazard for anyone engaged in empathic work.⁷ This framing matters for institutional response. If misdirected agency is partly a function of secondary traumatic stress, then punitive intervention is contraindicated. You do not discipline someone out of a trauma response. You do not write up hyperarousal. You do not put "failed to follow crisis protocol" in a personnel file when the person's nervous system was operating in a state that makes protocol adherence neurologically difficult.

Support, not discipline. That is the correct orientation.

But.

Support cannot mean unlimited accommodation of behavior that harms students. A teacher experiencing genuine secondary traumatic stress who sends a mass email to families containing inaccurate legal information has still sent that email. The families who act on that information are still exposed to the consequences. The students whose immigration status is implicitly disclosed are still outed. The community organizations whose carefully coordinated response is disrupted are still dealing with the disruption. The psychological mechanism behind the action does not neutralize the harm the action produces.

Hold both. The person deserves support. The behavior requires correction. These are not contradictory. They are concurrent obligations that competent leadership must manage simultaneously. The failure to hold both, to collapse into either pure empathy ("she meant well, let it go") or pure accountability ("she violated protocol, write her up"), represents its own form of misdirected agency at the leadership level.

A Tangent Worth Taking

There is a risk, in laying out psychological mechanisms this precisely, of producing a framework so explanatory that it becomes exculpatory. If compensatory action is a predictable response to the efficacy gap, and if secondary traumatic stress produces hyperarousal that degrades deliberative reasoning, then the individual actor begins to disappear into the mechanism. She is not making choices. She is being acted upon by psychological forces. The letter writes itself through her.

This is seductive and wrong.

Bandura's own theory insists on human agency as a core construct. Self-efficacy theory is not a deterministic model. It describes probabilistic tendencies, not iron laws. The teacher who experiences the efficacy gap and STS-related hyperarousal is more likely to engage in compensatory action, not fated to. The mechanisms create conditions. They do not eliminate choice. And the purpose of naming the mechanisms is not to excuse the behavior but to make the choice visible. When you can see the gap between your emotional activation and your domain-specific competence, when you can recognize hyperarousal as a symptom rather than a conviction, you gain the capacity to choose differently.

That capacity is what this chapter is ultimately about. Not absolution. Expanded choice architecture.

Back to the main thread.

The Racial Dimension of Secondary Traumatic Stress

Here the analysis becomes more complicated, and the epistemological tension identified earlier becomes unavoidable.

Secondary traumatic stress, as Figley conceptualized it, is an individual psychological phenomenon. It operates at the level of the nervous system, the affective response, the cognitive schema. It is measurable. It is treatable. It is, within its framework, racially unmarked.

But the distribution of secondary traumatic stress in schools is not racially unmarked.

When immigration enforcement actions increase in a community, the staff members most likely to experience secondary traumatic stress from that increase are not distributed randomly across racial categories. White educators working in communities of color are encountering, often for the first time, the reality of state violence directed at the families they serve. For educators of color, particularly those from immigrant communities, the threat is not new. It is not secondary. It may be primary trauma, direct and personal, or it may be the continuation of a threat landscape they have inhabited their entire lives.

The distinction matters for understanding misdirected agency because the phenomenology of the two experiences is different even when the symptom profiles overlap. The white teacher experiencing secondary traumatic stress at the "discovery" of ICE enforcement in her community is experiencing something real. Her hyperarousal is genuine. Her distress is not performed. But her distress is also a function of relative insulation. She is distressed, in part, because this level of state threat is new to her. The communities she serves have been managing this threat, developing protective practices around it, building resilience in its shadow, for years or decades or generations.

This asymmetry produces a specific dynamic that Aaron Beck's (2011) cognitive model helps illuminate, though Beck himself did not apply it in this direction.¹⁰ Beck's work on cognitive distortions describes how threat perception is shaped by prior schema. When a person encounters a threat for the first time, the absence of prior schema means the threat is processed as maximally novel, which amplifies the emotional response.¹⁰ For white educators encountering community-level immigration enforcement for the first time, the schema absence produces a cognitive response that reads the situation as unprecedented emergency. For community members who have navigated this terrain before, the threat is serious but not unprecedented, and the response repertoire is correspondingly more calibrated.

The white educator's maximally activated, schema-absent response then enters the institutional space with the full weight of whiteness behind it. Her urgency is more likely to be heard as legitimate concern. Her compensatory actions are more likely to be supported by institutional resources. Her framing of the situation as unprecedented emergency is more likely to set the institutional agenda. And in this way, the secondary traumatic stress of white staff can itself become a mechanism of centering, displacing the knowledge, the response patterns, and the leadership of the communities actually under threat.

This is not a comfortable analysis. It asks white educators to hold the possibility that their genuine emotional response, their real distress at witnessing injustice, can function as a form of displacement even when it is sincere. It asks them to consider that the intensity of their response may be partly a measure of their prior insulation rather than their current moral clarity. And it asks institutions to consider whether their crisis response structures, which tend to amplify the voices of the most distressed adults in the building rather than the most knowledgeable, systematically privilege the white experience of community crisis.

None of this negates the reality of secondary traumatic stress in white educators. The symptoms are real. The suffering is real. The need for support is real. But the structural analysis adds a dimension that Figley's framework, operating as it does at the individual psychological level, cannot capture on its own.

The Epistemological Problem

This chapter has been moving between two bodies of scholarship that do not share epistemological foundations, and the tension deserves direct acknowledgment rather than quiet avoidance.

Bandura's self-efficacy theory and Figley's secondary traumatic stress model both operate within a broadly positivist framework. They assume measurable constructs. They seek causal mechanisms. They generate testable hypotheses. They locate their primary unit of analysis in the individual, even when they acknowledge contextual factors. The evidence base for both is built on quantitative measurement, experimental and quasi-experimental design, and statistical inference. This is not a criticism. It is a description of the epistemological commitments that make these frameworks powerful for the questions they were designed to answer.

The racial analysis introduced in the previous section operates from different commitments. Critical race theory, which informs that analysis even when it is not cited by name, begins from the premise that racism is ordinary, not aberrational; that racial hierarchy structures all social institutions, including the production of knowledge itself; that the experience of people of color provides essential epistemological access to realities that dominant frameworks systematically obscure.¹¹ These are not hypotheses to be tested within a positivist framework. They are foundational assumptions that constitute a different way of knowing.

Yoking these frameworks together, as this chapter has done, produces either productive heterodoxy or theoretical confusion. Possibly both. The positivist frameworks explain individual psychological mechanisms with precision and empirical grounding. The critical framework explains structural positioning with political and historical depth. Together, they illuminate a phenomenon, misdirected agency in community crisis, that neither can fully explain alone. Separately, each would produce an incomplete account: the positivist account would explain the teacher's behavior without explaining its racial dynamics; the critical account would explain the racial dynamics without explaining the psychological mechanisms that make the behavior feel rational to

the person engaged in it.

Whether this combination is coherent or merely convenient is a question this chapter cannot answer for the reader. The author's position is that the combination is necessary, that the phenomenon under investigation is simultaneously psychological and structural, and that fidelity to the phenomenon requires analytical tools from both traditions even at the cost of epistemological tidiness. But this position is itself a claim that can be contested, and readers operating from strong commitments to either epistemological tradition will find legitimate grounds for objection.

What the chapter can offer is transparency about the seams. When the analysis shifts from "self-efficacy is domain-specific and this produces compensatory action" to "the distribution of secondary traumatic stress is racially patterned and this produces centering dynamics," it is crossing an epistemological boundary. The reader should feel the shift. The smoothness of the prose should not obscure the roughness of the join.

Technical Problems, Adaptive Challenges, and the Space Between

Ronald Heifetz (1994) introduced a distinction that has become nearly ubiquitous in leadership literature: the difference between technical problems and adaptive challenges.¹² Technical problems, in Heifetz's framework, are those for which existing knowledge and procedures are sufficient. The problem may be complex, but the solution pathway is known. Adaptive challenges, by contrast, require changes in values, beliefs, roles, or relationships. They cannot be solved by expertise alone. They require learning, and the learning is often painful because it involves loss.¹²

The distinction has genuine analytical power. When a school faces a technical problem (a broken boiler, a scheduling conflict, a compliance deadline), the appropriate response is to deploy existing expertise efficiently. When a school faces an adaptive challenge (declining trust between staff and community, a culture of low expectations, racialized discipline patterns), the appropriate response is slower, more relational, more tolerant of ambiguity, and more demanding of the leader's capacity to regulate her own anxiety while the system learns.

Community crisis, in the standard application of Heifetz's framework, is an adaptive challenge. It requires changes in how staff understand their roles, how the institution relates to its community, how power and knowledge flow. The misdirected agency this book describes can be understood, through this lens, as a technical response to an adaptive challenge: staff deploying existing expertise (letter-writing, curriculum modification, public advocacy) in a situation that requires a fundamentally different kind of engagement.

The framework fits. But it fits too cleanly, and the cleanliness should provoke suspicion.

When ICE agents are conducting enforcement operations in a school's community, when families are in hiding, when children arrive at school not knowing if their parents will be home when they return, is that really

best described as an "adaptive challenge requiring slow culture change"? The language of adaptive leadership, with its emphasis on holding steady, tolerating disequilibrium, and resisting the pressure for quick fixes, can sound obscene in the face of immediate threat. A family facing deportation does not need their school to undergo a learning process. They need specific, concrete, legally informed assistance. They need someone to connect them with an immigration attorney. They need to know their rights. They need the school to not make their situation worse.

The counterargument is that the immediate assistance and the adaptive work are not mutually exclusive. The school can connect families with legal resources (a technical response) while simultaneously doing the slower work of examining its own assumptions about who holds knowledge, whose fear sets the institutional agenda, and how the school positions itself relative to its community (an adaptive challenge). Heifetz himself would likely argue that the distinction is not between action and inaction but between action that addresses root causes and action that merely alleviates symptoms.¹²

But the temporal dimension complicates even this reasonable synthesis. Adaptive work takes time. Community crisis operates on a different timeline. The family facing a removal order next Tuesday does not have the luxury of waiting for the school's adaptive learning curve. And the staff member who insists on "doing something now" may be exhibiting compensatory action driven by the efficacy gap and secondary traumatic stress, or she may be correctly perceiving that the situation demands immediate response and that the language of "adaptive challenge" is being used, consciously or not, to justify institutional paralysis.

The honest answer is that community crisis is both. It contains technical components that require specific expertise and immediate action. It contains adaptive components that require institutional learning and cultural change. And it contains elements that resist the binary entirely, situations where the right action requires both speed and wisdom, both expertise and humility, both doing and not-doing. The Heifetz framework, like the Bandura framework, illuminates real features of the phenomenon. Also like the Bandura framework, it illuminates by simplifying, and the simplification has costs.

The Convergence

Pull the threads together.

Self-efficacy theory explains why educators, confronted with community crisis, default to deploying the competencies they already possess. The domain-specificity of efficacy beliefs means that emotional activation in an unfamiliar domain does not produce competent action in that domain. It produces compensatory action: the deployment of familiar competencies in contexts where they do not fit. This is not a character flaw. It is a structural feature of how human cognition manages what lies between motivation and capacity.

Secondary traumatic stress theory explains why the compensatory action carries such intensity. Hyperarousal, the hallmark symptom most relevant to misdirected agency, degrades deliberative reasoning while amplifying the felt urgency to act. The person experiencing STS-related hyperarousal does not experience herself as impaired. She experiences herself as activated, alert, morally clear. The symptom masquerades as virtue.

The racial analysis explains why the distribution of these psychological phenomena is not neutral. White educators are more likely to experience community-level threat as novel, which amplifies both the efficacy gap and the secondary traumatic stress response. Their amplified responses are more likely to be institutionally validated. And the institutional validation of their distress can displace the knowledge and leadership of the communities actually navigating the threat.

The adaptive leadership framework explains why institutional responses tend to default to technical fixes. It also, if applied with sufficient honesty, explains why the framework itself can become a technical fix: a sophisticated vocabulary for describing the problem that substitutes for actually engaging it.

Each of these frameworks captures something real. None captures the whole. Together, they produce a picture of misdirected agency as a phenomenon that is simultaneously psychological and structural, individual and institutional, driven by genuine care and shaped by racial positioning. The teacher who drafts the letter to ICE is experiencing a real efficacy gap, real secondary traumatic stress, real moral concern. She is also enacting a pattern shaped by whiteness, institutional position, and the specific ways that American schools distribute voice and authority.

The convergence of these analyses does not produce a neat prescription. It produces a more accurate description. And accurate description, in this case, is a precondition for any intervention that does not simply reproduce the pattern it claims to address.

What Follows From This

If the psychological mechanisms described in this chapter are operating, several implications follow for institutional response.

First, professional development that treats misdirected agency as a knowledge deficit will fail. The problem is not that staff lack information about immigration law or community resources, though many do. The problem is that the efficacy gap and secondary traumatic stress create cognitive conditions under which new information is poorly integrated. Hyperaroused nervous systems do not learn well. Professional development must address the affective state before, or at least alongside, the informational content.

Second, crisis protocols that rely on staff self-regulation will fail disproportionately. Self-regulation is itself a domain-specific competence, and most educators have not developed it for the conditions that community crisis produces. Protocols must be designed with the assumption that some staff will be operating from a hyperaroused state, and must include structural supports (clear role definitions, explicit chains of communication, physical spaces for de-escalation) that compensate for degraded individual regulatory capacity.

Third, institutional responses that center the distress of the most vocal adults in the building will systematically privilege white experience. This is not because white distress is illegitimate. It is because the institutional mechanisms for hearing distress (staff meetings, union channels, administrative complaint procedures) are more accessible to those with institutional power, and in most American schools, institutional power is racially distributed. Centering the most distressed adults is not the same as centering the most affected community. Competent crisis leadership requires the capacity to distinguish between these.

Fourth, the language of adaptive leadership, while analytically useful, must be deployed with awareness of its potential to aestheticize urgency. Telling a staff member that her impulse to act immediately reflects a "technical response to an adaptive challenge" may be accurate. It may also be experienced as dismissal, particularly if the staff member is watching families she cares about face state violence. The framework must be held lightly enough to recognize when the situation actually demands immediate technical response, and firmly enough to prevent that recognition from becoming a blanket justification for any action that feels urgent.

Fifth, and perhaps most difficult: institutions must build the capacity to provide genuine support for staff experiencing secondary traumatic stress while simultaneously holding clear boundaries around the behaviors that STS can produce. This is not a contradiction, but it requires a sophistication that many school systems have not developed. The counseling referral and the corrective conversation may need to happen in the same meeting. The administrator who cannot hold both, who defaults to either pure empathy or pure accountability, will make the situation worse regardless of which default she chooses.

Closing

The psychological mechanisms of misdirected agency are real, describable, and to a significant degree predictable. Self-efficacy theory, secondary traumatic stress research, and cognitive models of threat perception together explain why well-meaning educators, confronted with community crisis, produce actions that feel essential but function as displacement. These mechanisms are not excuses. They are explanations, and explanations that illuminate the structural conditions, the racial dynamics, and the institutional patterns that shape who experiences the efficacy gap, whose hyperarousal sets the agenda, and whose compensatory action carries institutional weight. The psychological and the structural are not separate layers of analysis applied to

CHAPTER 6

The Mirror Question

Dr. Priya Mehta heard about the fight at 9:14 on a Tuesday morning. Two ninth-graders, one of them a Somali student who had been in the district less than a year. By the time she reached the main office, the story had already calcified into something simple: an altercation in the hallway, a shove that escalated, a security guard who intervened. The Somali student's mother was on her way. A teacher had already emailed Priya to say the district needed a "cultural response."

Priya sat down at her desk and pulled up the incident report. She could feel the urgency building in her chest, the familiar pull toward action. She was already drafting the email in her head: a restorative circle, a community meeting, a statement from the school about its commitment to welcoming immigrant families. She could see the whole sequence unfolding, each step intentional, each step visible.

Then she stopped.

She asked herself the question she had been practicing for two years, the one she kept on a card in her top desk drawer: *Is my action right now serving the people I am trying to serve, or is it serving my need to feel like I am doing something?*

She sat with it. The restorative circle was a good idea, probably. The community meeting might be, too. But neither of those things needed to happen today. What needed to happen today was that a fourteen-year-old boy who had been shoved in a hallway needed to feel safe at school tomorrow. And his mother, who was driving to the building right now, needed to be met by someone who would listen before they performed.

Priya put the draft email away. She walked to the front office. She sat with the mother for forty minutes, mostly listening, asking a few questions, writing nothing down. The mother talked about her son's anxiety, his difficulty sleeping, the sounds he still heard sometimes that other people could not. She talked about the apartment and the neighbor who had been kind. She did not talk about culture. She talked about her child.

Priya did not send the email. She did not convene the restorative circle that week. She connected the family with the school counselor and followed up three days later. The teacher who had requested a "cultural response" sent a second email asking what was being done. Priya responded with a brief note explaining the steps taken and did not explain her reasoning further.

It cost her something. The teacher told two colleagues that Priya was "not taking it seriously." A parent on the equity committee asked at the next meeting whether the school had a protocol for incidents involving immigrant students. Priya said yes, they did, and described it. She did not describe the forty minutes in the front office. She did not need credit for listening.

The discomfort sat with her for weeks. She had done the right thing and it felt like doing nothing.

Tom Brennan had been an assistant principal for six years, and he had gotten very good at knowing his lane. When conversations about race came up in leadership meetings, he listened. When the equity team proposed new initiatives, he supported them. When teachers came to him with concerns about discipline disparities, he directed them to the district equity coordinator. He had read the books. He understood that white men in his position could do real damage by centering themselves, and he had built an entire professional identity around not doing that.

The mirror question came to him sideways, during a conversation with a Black colleague named Denise who taught tenth-grade English. They were eating lunch in the faculty room when Denise mentioned, almost offhand, that she had asked three times for a schedule change that would allow her to run a writing workshop for students who were failing. Three times, and nothing. "I know you can't do anything about it," she said. "It's a scheduling thing."

Tom nodded. He almost let it go. Then something caught him, a small hook in the phrase "I know you can't do anything about it." Because he could. He literally had scheduling authority. He had been sitting on it for three years, signing off on the master schedule every semester, and it had never once occurred to him that his authority over that process was relevant to what Denise was describing.

He asked himself the question: *Is my inaction right now serving the people I am trying to serve, or is it serving my need to feel like I am being appropriately restrained?*

The answer was immediate and uncomfortable. His restraint was not humility. It was comfort. Staying in his lane meant never having to risk getting it wrong, never having to put his name on a decision that might be criticized, never having to explain why he, specifically, had intervened in something that touched race and equity and resource allocation. His lane was a refuge, and he had mistaken it for principled behavior.

Tom pulled up the master schedule that afternoon. The change Denise needed was not complicated. It required moving one section of study hall and reassigning a paraprofessional for forty minutes. He made the change, sent the documentation to the principal, and told Denise it was done.

She stared at him. "That's it?"

"That's it."

"I've been asking since October."

He did not apologize. Apologizing would have centered his feelings about having failed to act. He just said, "I should have looked at this the first time you asked." Then he went back to his office and sat with the specific quality of shame that comes from realizing your caution was never about protecting anyone but yourself.

Elena Torres had been a school counselor for eleven years, and she still could not always tell. That was the thing nobody warned you about in graduate school: that the longer you did this work, the harder it got to distinguish your genuine professional judgment from the patterns your own history had carved into your thinking.

The student sitting across from her was a junior named Jaylen, seventeen, bright, disengaged, increasingly absent. His teachers described him as "checked out." His mother, when Elena reached her by phone, said he was fine at home. The school psychologist had screened him and found no clinical concerns. By every formal measure, Jaylen was a student who was choosing not to engage.

Elena did not believe that. Something in his posture, in the way he answered questions with questions, in the half-second delay before he smiled, told her there was more. But she had been wrong before. Two years earlier, she had pursued a similar instinct with a different student and ended up overstepping badly, involving a family in services they did not want, creating friction that took months to repair. She had learned from that. She had learned to check herself.

So she asked: *Is my action right now serving Jaylen, or is it serving my need to be the one who sees what others miss?*

She sat with the question for a long time. She turned it over. She examined her own history, the way she had always been drawn to the students who seemed to be hiding something, the quiet satisfaction she felt when her instinct proved correct. She was honest enough to see that pattern clearly. She was also honest enough to see that the pattern being present did not make her instinct wrong.

She could not tell. Genuinely could not tell. The mirror gave back a blurred image, and no amount of staring made it sharper.

Elena did what she could. She adjusted her schedule to be available during Jaylen's lunch period, not to counsel him but to be present in the space where he spent his time. She mentioned to his English teacher that she was keeping an eye on things, without dramatizing. She documented her observations in her notes, privately, and set a reminder to reassess in two weeks.

Two weeks later, Jaylen was still absent more than present. Elena referred him to the student support team, which met and decided to request a parent conference. The conference happened. Jaylen's mother was polite and guarded. Nothing broke open. Nothing resolved.

Three months later, Jaylen transferred to another school. Elena never learned what happened. She never got the satisfaction of being right or the clarity of being wrong. She got ambiguity, which is what this work gives you most of the time if you are paying attention.

She still thinks about him. She still does not know if she did enough or too much or exactly the wrong thing at exactly the wrong moment. The mirror question did not save her from that. It just made sure she was looking.

II.

Three practitioners. Three encounters with the same question. One redirected. One acted. One sat in the fog and moved forward anyway. None of them got a clean resolution, the kind of ending that makes for a compelling conference keynote or a tidy case study. What they got instead was the thing the mirror question actually offers: a moment of honest self-examination before the action, during the action, in the aftermath of the action.

The question itself is deceptively simple. You can memorize it in ten seconds: *Is my action right now serving the people I am trying to serve, or is it serving my need to feel like I am doing something?*

The difficulty is not in the asking. The difficulty is in the answering.

This distinction matters enormously, because most professional development treats self-reflection as a skill that improves with practice until it becomes reliable. Ask the question, get an honest answer, adjust

accordingly. The mirror question does not work that way. It works more like a diagnostic tool that sometimes returns ambiguous results, and the ambiguity is not a flaw in the tool. It is an accurate reading of the situation.

The question has its roots in a shift that Shawn Ginwright articulated when he described the movement from a lens focused outward, on the problems of communities, to a mirror turned inward, on the assumptions and needs of the practitioner. That pivot, from lens to mirror, is the foundational move. Everything in this chapter depends on it. But the pivot alone is not enough. You can turn the mirror toward yourself and still see what you want to see. The mirror question adds a specific focal point: not "What are my biases?" or "What are my assumptions?" but "Whose need is my current action actually serving?"

That specificity is what makes it useful and what makes it hard.

III.

Here is the core problem. When habitus is operating, as it always is, the practitioner does not experience their action as self-serving. They experience it as necessary, responsive, and aligned with their values. The principal who convenes an emergency equity meeting after an incident genuinely believes the meeting serves students. The superintendent who launches a new initiative genuinely believes the initiative addresses a real need. The counselor who pursues a hunch genuinely believes the pursuit serves the student in front of them.

And sometimes they are right. That is what makes this so difficult. The feeling of genuine service and the feeling of self-serving action are, from the inside, nearly identical. They share the same neurological signature: urgency, moral clarity, the warm certainty that one is doing the right thing. The mirror question does not eliminate that overlap. It just forces you to stand in the overlap for a moment longer than is comfortable and ask whether you can distinguish between the two.

Most of the time, you can. Not perfectly, not with certainty, but well enough to catch the most obvious misalignments. Priya caught hers. She recognized that the restorative circle and the community meeting, both good things in the abstract, were being activated not by the student's need but by her need to demonstrate responsiveness. That recognition did not require unusual self-awareness. It required a pause long enough for the question to do its work.

Tom's case is more instructive, because it shows that the mirror question cuts in both directions. We tend to associate misdirected agency with overaction: the practitioner who does too much, who intervenes where they should not, who centers themselves in someone else's crisis. But misdirected agency also operates through inaction. Tom's restraint was not principled. It was protective. He had built an elaborate justification for never using his actual authority in service of the people who needed it, and the justification was sophisticated enough to feel like wisdom.

The mirror question, when he finally encountered it, did not tell him to act. It told him to examine his inaction with the same scrutiny he would apply to action. And when he did, the inaction collapsed. It was not humility. It was avoidance wearing humility's clothes.

Elena's case is the most common and the least discussed. She asked the question, examined herself honestly, and still could not tell. The mirror returned a blurred image. She acted anyway, imperfectly, within the bounds of her role, and the outcome was neither vindication nor failure. It was the irreducible ambiguity of working with human beings in institutions that are not designed for the kind of attention she was trying to provide.

We do not talk about Elena's outcome enough. We talk about Priya's clarity and Tom's breakthrough because those are the stories that teach clean lessons. But most practitioners live in Elena's territory most of the time: doing their best, checking themselves, unable to be certain, acting anyway. The mirror question is not less valuable in that territory. It is more valuable, because it prevents the practitioner from collapsing into either false certainty or paralysis.

IV.

I want to be honest about my own relationship with this question, because I have taught it and practiced it and failed at it often enough to know its limits from the inside.

There was a period, maybe three years, when I was consulting with a district that was experiencing significant community conflict around school closures. I was brought in to facilitate community engagement. I believed, genuinely and thoroughly, that my facilitation was serving the community. I designed processes. I ran listening sessions. I built feedback loops. I was doing the work.

And I was also, in ways I did not see for a long time, serving my own need to be the person who could hold the room. I liked being the one people trusted. I liked being the calm presence in a volatile situation. I liked the feeling of competence that came from managing conflict well. None of those feelings were wrong, exactly. Competence is not a sin. But they were shaping my decisions in ways I did not examine, and the people paying the price for that unexamined shaping were the community members whose anger I was, in some subtle but real way, managing rather than honoring.

I did not catch it with the mirror question. I caught it when a community member, a grandmother who had attended every single session, said to me after the fourth meeting: "You're very good at this. But I don't think you're hearing us."

She was right. I was good at it. And being good at it had become the thing I was serving, not the community, not the students, not the families facing displacement. My skill had become its own justification,

and the mirror question, which I was supposedly practicing, had not penetrated deep enough to show me what that grandmother saw in ten seconds.

I tell that story not to perform humility but to make a specific point: the mirror question is necessary and insufficient. It is a practice, not a guarantee. It works best when it is supplemented by relationships honest enough to tell you what you cannot see. And it fails most predictably when the practitioner is skilled, because skill generates a feeling of alignment that is extremely difficult to interrogate from the inside.

V.

So what do we do with a tool that is necessary and insufficient? We use it anyway, and we build structures around it.

The first structure is understanding loci of control. Every practitioner operates within a specific sphere of authority and influence. For a classroom teacher, that sphere includes the instructional environment, the relationships with students, the communication with families about their child's learning, and the collaborative work with colleagues. For a building principal, the sphere expands to include staffing, scheduling, culture-building, and resource allocation within the building. For a central office administrator, it expands further. For a superintendent, further still.

Most misdirected agency involves acting at a locus beyond one's role authorization. The teacher who decides to address a systemic disciplinary problem by unilaterally changing their grading practice. The counselor who takes on a therapeutic role they are not trained for because the student's need feels urgent. The assistant principal who launches a building-wide initiative without consulting the principal because the initiative feels too important to wait. Each of these involves a real need and a genuine desire to respond. Each also involves stepping outside the sphere where the practitioner has the authority, the competence, and the relational context to act effectively.

Knowing your lane is not the same as staying passive. This is where Tom's story is crucial. Tom knew his lane. He knew it so well that he had turned it into a fortress. The problem was not that he respected the boundaries of his role. The problem was that he had drawn those boundaries too narrowly, excluding authority he actually possessed, because the narrower boundaries were more comfortable.

The discipline is twofold. First, know where your actual authority begins and ends, not the comfortable version, but the real version. Second, examine whether the lane system itself is adequate. These are separate questions, and collapsing them causes real damage. A teacher who decides the lane system is inadequate and therefore acts outside their lane is not being courageous. They are being undisciplined. But a teacher who recognizes the lane system is inadequate and raises that concern through appropriate channels, persistently, is

doing exactly what the system needs.

The mirror question operates at the first level: Is my action right now serving others, or is it serving me? The structural question operates at the second level: Is this system adequate to the needs it is supposed to serve? Both questions matter. But they require different actions, and the practitioner who confuses them, who uses structural critique as justification for individual overreach, is engaged in a particularly seductive form of misdirected agency.

VI.

The second structure is what I call a bounded action repertoire. This is the set of pre-established actions within your competence and role that you can activate during moments of crisis or urgency, when the pressure to do something is highest and the risk of misdirected agency is greatest.

For a classroom teacher, a bounded action repertoire might include: maintaining routine and predictability in the classroom when the school community is in crisis. Connecting students with counseling services through established referral channels. Communicating with families through the school's communication protocols. Providing emotional support within the instructional relationship, which means being present, being steady, being honest about what you know and do not know.

This is not a lesser contribution than heroic intervention. It is the contribution that schools need most.

I want to dwell on that because the culture of educational leadership actively works against it. We celebrate the principal who stayed at the building until midnight. We celebrate the teacher who drove to a student's house. We celebrate the counselor who went above and beyond. And sometimes those celebrations are warranted, because sometimes the situation genuinely requires action beyond the normal scope. But the celebration itself creates a gravitational pull toward overaction, a sense that the ordinary, bounded, competent response is somehow not enough.

It is enough. Maintaining a calm classroom when the building is in turmoil is an act of profound service. Referring a student to the counselor rather than trying to counsel them yourself is an act of professional discipline that directly serves the student. Communicating honestly with families, saying "Here is what I know, here is what I do not know, here is what I am doing within my role," is an act of integrity that builds the kind of trust heroic gestures cannot.

The bounded action repertoire works because it is established before the crisis. You think it through when you are calm. You identify the actions that fall within your competence, your authority, and your relational context. You practice them, not in the sense of rehearsing specific scenarios, but in the sense of building the habits that make bounded action feel natural rather than restrictive.

Then, when the crisis comes and the pressure to do something builds and the mirror question returns a blurred image and you genuinely cannot tell whether your planned action serves others or serves your need to be the person who responds, you have a fallback. You have a set of actions you know are within your lane, within your competence, and aligned with your role. You do those things. You do them well. And you accept that doing them well, without drama, without visibility, without the emotional reward of heroic intervention, is the job.

VII.

There is a warmth in this that I want to name, because it can sound austere from the outside. Bounded action, knowing your lane, questioning your motives: these can seem like constraints on caring. They are not. They are the architecture that allows caring to function in an institutional context without collapsing into something that serves the practitioner more than the people they serve.

Priya cared deeply about the student and his mother. That caring was not diminished by her decision to listen rather than perform. It was honored by it. Tom cared about Denise and about the students who would benefit from the writing workshop. That caring was not activated by his restraint. It was activated by his decision to stop being restrained and use the authority he actually had. Elena cared about Jaylen. That caring did not produce a resolution. It produced a sustained, attentive, bounded presence that may or may not have mattered to him, and she will never know.

We want caring to be enough. We want it to guide us reliably toward right action. The mirror question is the acknowledgment that it does not, that caring without self-examination becomes the raw material for misdirected agency, and that the self-examination itself does not guarantee we will get it right. What it guarantees is that we will be honest with ourselves about what we are doing and why. That honesty is not a small thing. In institutions that run on performance and urgency and the appearance of competence, the willingness to pause and ask whose need you are actually serving is a radical act.

But let me be clear about what radical means here. It does not mean dramatic. It does not mean visible. It does not mean the kind of act that gets celebrated at a leadership retreat. It means the act that happens in the quiet of your own thinking, when no one is watching, when there is no audience for your self-reflection, when the only person who will know you asked the question is you.

That is where the work lives: in the moment before the email, in the pause before the meeting, in the silence between the impulse and the action. The conference presentations and equity audits and professional development sessions have their place, but the mirror question lives in the private, unglamorous pause where two channels of experience, the one that wants to help and the one that might be noticing the cost of the helping to the person being helped, can run together long enough for the second to inform the first. It lives in the

CHAPTER 7

What Repair Requires

Dr. Sarah Lindquist arrived at her office at 6:40 on a Tuesday morning, which was early even for her. She set her bag on the desk and did not open it. She sat in the chair she had chosen when she took the assistant superintendent role three years ago, a chair she had positioned so it faced the window rather than the door because she liked the idea of a leader who looked outward, and she stared at the parking lot, which was empty except for the custodian's truck and a sedan she did not recognize.

The community meeting had ended fourteen hours earlier. She had driven home in silence, which was unusual. She had not called her husband from the car. She had not dictated notes into her phone the way she typically did after evening events, capturing impressions while they were fresh, cataloguing what had gone well and what needed follow-up. She had driven the eleven minutes from Westfield Middle School to her house and sat in the driveway for a while, the engine running, the heat blowing against her face, and then she had gone inside and said she was tired and gone to bed.

She was not tired. She was something else, and the something else was the problem, because she could not name it with any precision, and Sarah Lindquist was a person who named things. That was her reputation and, in a certain light, her gift: the capacity to walk into a room where something had gone wrong and say, clearly and without excessive softness, what the something was. She had built a career on that capacity. Principals in the district called her when they needed someone to sit with a difficult conversation and hold the frame. She was good at it. She believed she was good at it, which is a different statement, one that matters here.

What had happened at the community meeting was this. The district had proposed a boundary change that would redistribute students across two elementary schools, one serving a predominantly white neighborhood and one serving a neighborhood that was roughly sixty percent Black and Latino. The meeting was held in the school that would absorb more students, a building that already felt overcrowded, in a community that had been promised improvements for years and had learned to hear promises as a particular genre of institutional noise. Parents were angry, and their anger was specific, grounded in a history of being the school that received whatever the district needed to redistribute while the other school received whatever the district wanted to invest.

Sarah had prepared remarks. She had anticipated the anger. She had practiced, in her car that afternoon, the posture of listening without defending, the phrases she had learned in equity training about honoring community voice and sitting with discomfort. She had done the preparation that serious people do.

And then a parent, a Black woman named, in this account, Ms. Delgado, had said something that Sarah experienced as an accusation. Ms. Delgado said that the boundary change was one more way the district moved Black and brown children around like furniture, and that the people making these decisions would never send their own kids to a school they were willing to overcrowd, and that she was tired of being asked to trust a process designed by people who did not have to live with its consequences.

Sarah's prepared posture failed. What she said, in response, with a voice that she later recognized had been shaking, was that she understood the frustration, that she had worked in education for twenty-two years because she cared about every child in the district, that she had spent her career fighting for equitable resources, and that it was hurtful, genuinely hurtful, to be told that she did not care about the children in this building when she had given up evenings and weekends and time with her own family to make this district better for everyone.

She said more than that. She said it with tears visible, which she would later describe to a colleague as "losing it for a second" in a tone that suggested the tears were an aberration rather than a revelation. She said it in a room full of people who had come to talk about their children's school and who now found themselves, as they had found themselves so many times before, managing a white woman's feelings about being perceived as something other than good.

The room had shifted after that. Not in the way that rooms shift when a breakthrough occurs, when someone says the hard thing and everyone exhales and moves forward together. The room shifted the way rooms shift when a transaction has occurred that everyone present understands differently. Ms. Delgado sat back in her chair. Several parents exchanged glances. The meeting continued, but the thing that had been building, the possibility that the community might actually be heard on its own terms, had been displaced by Sarah's need to be recognized as

someone who cared.

Now it was 6:40 in the morning, and Sarah Lindquist sat in her office knowing that she had done something wrong without being able to say, with full honesty, what the something was.

She knew the tears had been a problem. She knew that much. She had read enough, attended enough trainings, had enough conversations with colleagues of color who trusted her enough to be direct, that she could identify white tears in a workshop scenario and explain why they were harmful. She could deliver that explanation with clarity and conviction. She had delivered it, in professional development sessions she had designed, to other white educators who needed to hear it.

What she could not do, sitting in her office with the parking lot filling slowly with other people's cars, was close the distance between knowing what she had done and knowing how to repair it. The knowing felt like two separate things: a theoretical knowledge that she could articulate and an experiential knowledge that she could not access. She understood the concept. She did not understand herself, or more precisely, she understood herself well enough to recognize the gap but not well enough to cross it. The gap sat there, between the meeting and the morning, between the harm and whatever was supposed to come next, and she did not know what to put in it.

I do not know what to put in it either, and I want to be honest about that before this chapter goes any further.

The preceding chapters of this book have built a framework. They have named misdirected agency as a phenomenon, traced its roots in habitus and professional socialization, identified whiteness-as-property as the structural mechanism through which it operates, described white emotional trespass as one of its most common expressions, and examined the self-efficacy trap that makes the pattern self-reinforcing. The framework has explanatory power. I believe that. I have watched it illuminate dynamics in schools and districts that other frameworks left opaque, and I have seen practitioners use it to name patterns they had experienced but could not articulate.

But a framework that explains harm without addressing repair is, at best, incomplete, and at worst, a sophisticated form of the same displacement it claims to interrupt. If the only thing this book accomplishes is helping people understand why white educators cause harm in community spaces, and if it offers nothing for the morning after, then it has produced knowledge that serves the analyst more than the community. I am aware of this problem, and I am not confident that what follows solves it.

The difficulty begins with the nature of the harm itself. If misdirected agency is dispositional, produced by habitus rather than by conscious choice, then the question of accountability becomes genuinely complicated. I do not mean complicated in the way that word is sometimes used to avoid hard positions. I mean that the

standard frameworks for accountability, which assume a rational agent who chose a course of action and can therefore be held responsible for its consequences, do not map cleanly onto behavior that is generated by dispositions the actor did not consciously form and may not be able to consciously override.

This is not an argument for absolution. I want to be clear about that because the argument I am making can be, and has been, co-opted to serve exactly that purpose. The claim that "I didn't mean to" or "I wasn't aware" or "it's just how I was socialized" has been used by white educators for decades as a shield against accountability, and I have no interest in sharpening that shield. But the question remains, and it is a real question, not a rhetorical one: what does accountability look like when the mechanism of harm is habitus?

Bourdieu himself was not especially helpful on this point. His analytical framework was designed to explain the reproduction of social structures, not to prescribe interventions for individuals caught within them. When he discussed the possibility of transforming habitus, he tended toward structural solutions: change the field and the habitus will eventually follow.¹ This is probably correct as a long-term prediction. It is also entirely insufficient as guidance for someone sitting in an office the morning after a community meeting wondering what she should do before lunch.

The tension is real, and I have felt it in my own practice. I have sat across from white staff members who had committed acts of white emotional trespass, sometimes in my presence, and I have had to decide in real time what accountability looks like in that conversation. Do I name the behavior as a property claim, using the language of Harris and the framework of this book? That language is precise, but precision can function as violence when it lands on someone who does not yet have the conceptual infrastructure to receive it. Do I name it as a trauma response, using the language of secondary traumatic stress and the compassion-centered frameworks that Shawn Ginwright and others have developed?² That language is gentler, but gentleness can function as permission when the person receiving it is looking for a reason to believe they did nothing wrong.

I have tried both approaches. I have tried them in different combinations, at different moments, with different staff members, and I can report with genuine uncertainty that I do not know which one works. I have seen the structural naming land well, opening something in the person that allowed them to see their behavior as connected to something larger than their individual failing. I have seen the same naming land badly, producing a defensive spiral that entrenched the very disposition I was trying to interrupt. I have seen the compassion-centered approach create space for genuine reflection, and I have seen it create space for self-forgiveness so swift that it skipped the part where the person actually sat with what they had done.

The honest answer, the one I keep arriving at and keep hoping to move past, is that the approach matters less than the relationship, and the relationship is exactly the thing that the trespass has damaged. This is the circularity at the heart of repair work: the trust required to have the conversation is often the thing that was broken by the behavior the conversation is about.

There is a body of literature on repair in educational contexts, and I have read it with the kind of attention that comes from needing it to be true. Ginwright's healing-centered engagement framework offers what I find to be the most generative starting point, in part because it refuses the pathologizing move that characterizes so much of the trauma-informed literature.³ Where trauma-informed practice asks "what happened to you?", healing-centered engagement asks "what's right with you?", a reorientation that locates the person within their assets rather than their deficits and that treats healing as a collective rather than individual process.

The framework is powerful. I have used it. I believe in its premises. And I do not know if it applies to the specific situation this chapter is describing, which is the repair of harm committed by a white educator against a community of color.

Here is my hesitation. Healing-centered engagement was developed primarily as a framework for working with young people and communities that have experienced systemic harm, not as a framework for repairing the harm that white professionals cause through the exercise of property rights they do not recognize as property rights. When I apply it to the scenario of Dr. Lindquist sitting in her office, I find myself asking whether the "what's right with you?" orientation, directed at the white educator, risks centering her healing at the expense of the community's. The community does not need Sarah Lindquist to heal. The community needs Sarah Lindquist to stop doing the thing she did, and to do so in a way that does not require the community to manage her process of stopping.

Ginwright might respond, and I think he would be right, that healing-centered engagement is not meant to be applied to the perpetrator of harm in isolation from the community context. The framework is relational, not individual. It envisions healing as something that happens between people, not within them. But the practical reality of school leadership is that the conversation with the white staff member usually happens in private, in an office, one-on-one, because the alternative, public correction, produces a defensive reaction so intense that it typically makes the situation worse rather than better.⁴

So the leader is left in a room with a person who has caused harm, trying to hold two things simultaneously: genuine care for the person as a human being who is, in some real sense, enacting dispositions she did not choose, and genuine accountability for behavior that caused damage to people who did not deserve it. The tension between those two commitments is not theoretical. It is felt. It sits in the body of the leader as a physical discomfort, a tightness in the chest or a kind of nausea that comes from knowing that whatever you say next will be insufficient.

I have been in that room. I have been in it more times than I would like to count. And the practice I have developed, tentatively, with no confidence that it is correct, goes something like this.

The conversation begins with what I see in the person, not what I see in the behavior. "I see how much you care about these families. That caring is real, and I am not asking you to doubt it." This is not a strategy. It is

true. Sarah Lindquist does care. The caring is not the problem. The expression of the caring is the problem, and the distinction between those two things is where the conversation has to live if it is going to produce anything other than defensiveness or self-flagellation.

Then the harder part. "And I need you to hear something that might be difficult. What happened last night at that meeting, the moment when you shared your feelings about being misperceived, landed on that community in a way that you may not have intended and that I think you need to understand. Your pain in that moment was real. And it took up space that belonged to the people who came to talk about their children."

I have said versions of this many times. Sometimes the person hears it. Sometimes they hear the first part, the part about their caring being real, and use it as permission to stop listening to the second part. Sometimes they hear the second part as an attack, regardless of how carefully it is framed, and the conversation devolves into a defense of their intentions that replicates, in miniature, the very pattern that brought us into the room. And sometimes, maybe one time in four or five, something opens. The person sits with it. They do not rush to apologize, which is its own form of closure-seeking, a way of moving past the discomfort before the discomfort has done its work. They sit, and something shifts, and the next conversation is different from the one we just had.

I want to be honest about those odds. One in four or five is not a success rate that inspires programmatic confidence. It is not the kind of outcome that justifies a chapter title like "What Repair Requires," which implies that the chapter will tell you what repair requires, when what the chapter actually offers is a set of practices that sometimes work and sometimes do not and that I cannot reliably predict which it will be on any given occasion.

There is a deeper question beneath the practical one, and I have been circling it for several chapters without addressing it directly. The question is whether divestiture from whiteness-as-property is possible in any meaningful sense, or whether the best that can be achieved is a kind of managed awareness that reduces the frequency of trespass without eliminating the disposition that produces it.

Bourdieu's answer, to the extent that he provided one, leans toward pessimism. *Habitus* is durable. Dispositions formed over a lifetime do not dissolve in the heat of a single realization, or even in the sustained warmth of ongoing professional development. The white educator who has been accumulating the property interests of whiteness since birth, who has been formed by institutions that rewarded the exercise of those interests at every stage of her development, who carries those interests in her body as a set of pre-reflective orientations toward space, attention, and emotional entitlement, cannot simply decide to divest.⁵ Deciding is a conscious act, and the property lives below consciousness. It lives in the moment before the decision, in the perception that organizes the situation before deliberation begins. Sarah Lindquist did not decide to cry at the community meeting. The tears arrived before the decision, from a place in her formation that twenty-two years

of professional experience had reinforced rather than disrupted.

I share Bourdieu's pessimism more than I would like to. The patterns I have observed over years of this work, patterns I have also observed in myself, suggest that divestiture from the property interests of whiteness is not a single act but an ongoing, never-completed process that looks less like liberation and more like chronic disease management. You do not cure the disposition. You develop practices that help you catch it earlier, intervene before it produces the full cascade of harm, and repair more quickly when it does. The metaphor is imperfect. Comparing a structural advantage to a disease risks pathologizing something that is, at its root, a product of social organization rather than individual pathology. But the imperfection of the metaphor points toward something true: the work does not end. There is no moment at which the white educator can say, with honesty, "I have done the work," because the work is not a task with a completion state. It is a practice, in the sense that meditation is a practice or that sobriety is a practice, something you do every day without the expectation that you will one day no longer need to do it.

This is a hard thing to say in a book about educational leadership, a field that runs on solutions, that evaluates its scholars and practitioners by the interventions they produce and the outcomes those interventions generate. The expectation, when you write a chapter called "What Repair Requires," is that you will tell the reader what repair requires. The reader has been patient. They have moved through six chapters of analysis, framework-building, and structural critique. They are ready for the practical section, the numbered list, the set of moves they can make on Monday morning.

I do not have a numbered list. I have observations, provisional and self-consciously incomplete, about what I have seen work and what I have seen fail, and I offer them with the explicit caveat that my capacity to distinguish between the two may be less reliable than I would like it to be.

The first observation is about timing. When a white staff member has committed an act of white emotional trespass, the impulse of most leaders, including myself, is to address it quickly. The urgency feels professional: the community has been harmed, the harm needs to be named, the behavior needs to be corrected before it happens again. But I have learned, slowly and through repeated failure, that the timing of the intervention matters as much as its content. A conversation held within hours of the incident almost always produces defensiveness, not because the staff member is a defensive person but because the nervous system has not yet settled.⁶ The fight-or-flight activation that accompanied the original incident is still present, and the intervention, however carefully constructed, is experienced as another threat. The body does not distinguish between a community member's criticism and a supervisor's correction. Both land in the same place.

Waiting is difficult because it feels like complicity. Every hour that passes without naming the harm feels like an hour in which the institution is protecting the person who caused it. And that feeling is not entirely wrong. There is a version of "waiting for the right moment" that is, in practice, waiting until the moment has

passed and the conversation is no longer necessary because everyone has moved on. I have done this. I have told myself I was being strategic when I was being avoidant, and the line between the two is not always visible from inside the experience.

The second observation is about the relationship between support and accountability, which is not the sequential relationship that most leadership frameworks assume. The standard model says: support first, then accountability. Create safety, then deliver the hard message. Stabilize the relationship, then leverage it for change. This is sensible advice, and it is sometimes correct, and it also assumes that support and accountability are separate actions that can be sequenced rather than simultaneous commitments that must be held together.

What I have found, in the conversations that have actually produced movement, is that the staff member needs to experience both things at once: the genuine recognition that they are a whole person who cares and who is struggling, and the equally genuine insistence that their struggle does not excuse the harm and that something must change. Not support followed by accountability. Support and accountability as a single, uncomfortable, undivided thing. This is hard to do. It requires the leader to hold a kind of double consciousness, to see the person in front of them as both the subject of compassion and the agent of harm, without resolving the tension between those two perceptions by choosing one.⁷

The third observation concerns what happens after the conversation, which is where most institutional repair efforts fail. The conversation itself is not repair. It is, at best, the beginning of a process that the institution has very few structures to support. The white staff member who genuinely hears the feedback, who sits with the discomfort, who does not rush to apologize or to defend, is then returned to the same institutional environment that produced the disposition in the first place. She goes back to a building where her colleagues share her formation, where the reward structures have not changed, where the evaluation system still values visible action over disciplined restraint, where the professional culture still treats emotional intensity as evidence of moral seriousness. And the disposition, which was interrupted for the duration of the conversation, reasserts itself within the field that generated it, because that is what dispositions do.⁸

This is where Heifetz's distinction between technical and adaptive challenges becomes relevant, though I want to use it briefly and without the weight of a full theoretical apparatus.⁹ The technical response to white emotional trespass is a better conversation, a clearer protocol, a more skillful intervention by the leader. The adaptive response requires changing the conditions under which the disposition is formed and reinforced, which means changing institutional culture, hiring practices, evaluation systems, reward structures, and the distribution of power within the organization. The technical response is within most leaders' capacity. The adaptive response is within almost no one's individual capacity, because it requires the institution to do something that institutions are structurally disinclined to do: redistribute the property interests that the institution was organized to protect.

I am not saying that the technical response is worthless. I am saying that without the adaptive response, the technical response is a holding action. It manages individual incidents without changing the conditions that produce them. And a holding action, sustained over years, can start to feel like the work itself, can start to feel like enough, when it is actually the minimum.

There is something else I want to say, and I am not sure how to say it without undermining the seriousness of what precedes it. The something is this: I have seen moments where it worked. Not perfectly. Not permanently. Not in ways that I could systematize into a replicable model. But I have seen white educators who, through some combination of sustained relational accountability, institutional support, personal commitment, and what I can only describe as a willingness to be uncomfortable for longer than most people can tolerate, have shifted the way they occupy space.

I watched a white teacher, after a conversation very much like the one I described above, go back to a community she had harmed and say, in front of people who had every reason to distrust her, that she had taken up space that was not hers, that she was sorry, and that she was going to do the specific work of learning to be present without being central. And then she did it. Not immediately. Not without backsliding. Not without moments where the old disposition surfaced and she caught it, sometimes in real time and sometimes only afterward, and had to begin again. But she did it. Over months, and then over years, the community's relationship with her changed, not because she performed a transformation but because she practiced something that looked, from the outside, like a slow and unspectacular renegotiation of the terms on which she was present.

I do not know how to generalize from that example. I do not know what made it possible for that particular person in that particular context with that particular community. I can identify some factors: she had a supervisor who held her accountable without shaming her, she had colleagues of color who were willing to tell her the truth, she had, and this may matter more than anything else, a capacity for sitting with the knowledge that she had caused harm without rushing to resolve the discomfort of that knowledge into either self-punishment or self-forgiveness. She stayed in the space between those two options for a long time, and that staying, that refusal to resolve, may have been the thing that made the rest possible.

But I have also seen people with all of those factors in place who did not shift. Who heard the feedback and intellectualized it. Who apologized beautifully and changed nothing. Who developed a sophisticated vocabulary for describing their own whiteness that functioned, paradoxically, as a new form of the property interest it was supposed to relinquish. The person who can name their own white fragility in real time is not necessarily less fragile. They may simply be more skilled at converting self-awareness into a form of cultural capital that reinforces, rather than disrupts, their position.

I have described these practices with more confidence than I feel. The truth is that every approach I have offered is itself vulnerable to the dynamics this book describes. The private conversation can become a space where the white educator's feelings are, once again, centered. The language of "I see how much you care" can become a formula that produces the appearance of holding both support and accountability while actually prioritizing the former. The patient, relational approach can become an institutional habit that protects white comfort in the name of developmental sensitivity. I know this because I have watched all of these things happen, and because I have, in moments I am not proud of, been the person doing them.

I want to return to Dr. Lindquist, not to resolve her story but to sit with it.

She is still in her office. The parking lot is filling up. In twenty minutes, her assistant will arrive, and then the day will begin with its ordinary demands, and the community meeting will become one item among many, something to be "followed up on" in the language of institutional management. She will write an email to Ms. Delgado. The email will be carefully worded, because Sarah Lindquist is careful with words, and it will express something that is both genuine and insufficient: regret for the way the meeting unfolded, a commitment to continue listening, an invitation to meet privately to discuss the community's concerns.

Ms. Delgado may or may not respond. If she does, the response will be polite, because Ms. Delgado has learned, over years of interacting with institutions that have the power to affect her children's education, to be polite even when politeness costs her something. The email exchange will be filed. It will appear in a folder labeled "Community Engagement" alongside dozens of other exchanges that document the institution's commitment to relationship without altering the conditions that make the relationship unequal.

Or. Maybe not. Maybe something different happens. Maybe Sarah Lindquist sits in her office for another five minutes and does something she has never done, which is to not compose the email. To not manage the situation. To not produce the institutional artifact that demonstrates responsiveness. Maybe she calls the principal of Westfield Middle School, someone who was at the meeting, someone who knows the community, someone who can tell her what the room felt like from the other side of her tears. Maybe the principal tells her something she does not want to hear. Maybe she hears it anyway.

I do not know which version of the morning happens. That is not a narrative choice designed to create ambiguity. It is an honest statement about the limits of what I can predict. I have seen both mornings. I have seen the email version, which is far more common, and I have seen the other version, which is rare enough that I am not even certain I am reading it correctly when I see it. The machinery of institutional self-protection is strong, and it offers Dr. Lindquist a clear and well-lit path back to the version of herself that existed before the meeting, the version that is competent and caring and committed and that does not need to sit with the knowledge of having caused harm because the harm has been processed, managed, filed.

The other path is not well-lit. It does not have a protocol. It does not end in a folder labeled "Community Engagement." It begins with the admission that something happened that cannot be fixed by the tools the institution provides, and it continues into territory that I cannot map with the confidence that a reader of a book like this one might reasonably expect.

I have been writing this book as though I know more than I do. Not deliberately, not as a performance of authority, but because the act of writing, the construction of an argument across chapters, the accumulation of frameworks and citations and carefully rendered vignettes, produces a sense of coherence that the actual experience of the work does not support. The work is not coherent. It is messy, partial, full of moments where the framework illuminates and moments where the framework obscures, and I cannot always tell which is which while I am in it.

What repair requires, if I am forced to answer the question posed by the chapter's title, is something the institution is not designed to provide and the individual is not equipped to produce alone. It requires a willingness to sit in the space between harm and repair without filling it prematurely with apology, with explanation, with professional development, with any of the mechanisms the institution offers for converting discomfort into action. It requires the white educator to tolerate knowing that she has caused harm without converting that knowledge into a new form of self-narrative, whether that narrative is "I am terrible" or "I am growing." Both narratives center the self. Repair requires a decentering of the self that the self, by definition, cannot accomplish on its own terms.

Maybe that is why the moments I have seen it work are so difficult to systematize. The thing that makes repair possible may not be a practice at all, in the sense that practices can be taught and replicated and scaled. It may be closer to what happens when a person simply runs out of ways to avoid the thing they need to face, when the machinery of self-protection finally fails, not because they dismantled it through disciplined work but because the weight of the evidence became too heavy for the machinery to carry.

I am not satisfied with that answer. It locates change in a kind of structural exhaustion rather than in the intentional cultivation of different dispositions, and that feels both pessimistic and insufficient. Bourdieu would probably say it is realistic. Ginwright would probably say it misses the possibility of collective healing. Heifetz would probably say I am confusing an adaptive challenge with a chronic condition.

They might all be right. I do not know.

The work continues. The outcome is uncertain. That uncertainty is not a failure of the framework. It may be, and I offer this with more tentativeness than the declarative structure of the sentence suggests, its most honest feature.

¹ Bourdieu, P. (1990). *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice. Stanford University Press, 116-118. Bourdieu's discussions of habitus transformation tend to emphasize changes in field conditions rather than individual reflexive acts. His concept of "hysteresis," the

CHAPTER 8

When Institutions Protect Themselves

The preceding chapters have examined misdirected agency as an individual phenomenon. A white educator inserts herself into a community space. A helper escalates when redirected. An ally converts exclusion into evidence of superior commitment. The analysis has treated these behaviors as expressions of habitus, as exercises of property rights, as patterns of emotional trespass that operate below the threshold of conscious intention. The framework has been useful. It has made visible the structural mechanics that produce well-intentioned harm. And it has done so, for seven chapters, while leaving one question untouched.

What happens when the institution itself is the agent whose agency is misdirected?

The framework, as constructed, assumes a functional organizational context. It assumes that when individual misdirected agency is identified, the institution responds in good faith: redirecting the individual, examining the structural conditions that produced the behavior, adjusting protocols to prevent recurrence. The mirror question, introduced in Chapter 6, asks the individual to examine whose interests her actions serve. The framework assumes the institution is capable of asking that same question of itself. This chapter examines what happens when that assumption collapses.

Organizations are not neutral containers for individual action. Edgar Schein, whose three decades of research on organizational culture remain the most rigorous treatment of institutional assumption-making in the management literature, describes organizational culture as operating on three levels: artifacts, which are visible but difficult to interpret; espoused values, which the organization claims to hold; and basic underlying assumptions, which are taken for granted, invisible to insiders, and determinative of actual behavior.¹ The basic assumptions are the ones that matter for this analysis, because they are the ones that organizational members cannot see and therefore cannot interrogate. They are the institutional equivalent of Bourdieu's habitus: durable, transposable dispositions that organize perception and action below the threshold of deliberate choice.

An institution's basic assumptions about crisis response reveal what the institution actually values, as opposed to what it claims to value. When a critical incident involving race occurs, when a community member files a complaint alleging racial harm, when a staff member's behavior generates public attention, the institution responds. The speed of the response, the channel through which it flows, the people who are consulted and the people who are not, the language that is used in official communications, the actions that are taken and the actions that are deferred: all of these constitute an organizational response that is shaped by assumptions the organization has never articulated and may never have examined.

Schein's framework predicts that these assumptions will be invisible to organizational insiders precisely because they are shared.² When everyone in a leadership team operates from the same set of unexamined premises about what constitutes an appropriate institutional response to a racial crisis, the response feels natural. It feels like common sense. It feels like professionalism. It does not feel like a choice, because the alternatives have been rendered structurally invisible by the culture itself. The superintendent who directs her communications team to draft a carefully worded statement before speaking with the affected community is not making a decision she experiences as discretionary. She is doing what is done. She is operating within the assumptions of her organization's culture, assumptions that prioritize message control over community responsiveness, legal protection over relational repair, institutional coherence over the messy, unscripted work of actually listening to people who have been harmed.

The concept of institutional habitus extends this analysis.³ If individual habitus refers to the durable dispositions that organize a person's perception and action, institutional habitus refers to the durable dispositions that organize an institution's perception and action. These dispositions are produced by institutional history, by the accumulated weight of past decisions, past crises, past leadership priorities, and past consequences. An institution that was sued after a staff member spoke publicly about a racial incident has learned, at the level of basic assumption, that public speech about race is dangerous. That assumption does not exist in a policy manual. It exists in the reflexive tightening that occurs when a staff member posts about a community event on social media, in the phone call from central office that says "let's get ahead of this," in the quiet understanding among principals that certain topics are handled through certain channels and that deviation from those channels carries professional risk.

None of this requires conscious institutional intent. Institutional habitus, like individual habitus, operates precisely because it does not require conscious intent. The dispositions are embedded in routine, in workflow, in the physical architecture of who sits in which meeting and whose phone rings when something goes wrong. The institution does not decide to protect itself. It enacts protection through the accumulated patterns of a hundred prior crises, each of which deposited another layer of assumption into the organizational culture.

Derrick Bell's interest convergence thesis, applied at the institutional level, reveals a structural dynamic that individual-level analysis cannot capture.⁴ Bell's original argument concerned the relationship between Black interests and white interests in the advancement of racial justice. The institutional application concerns the relationship between community interests and organizational interests in the management of racial crisis.

The proposition is direct: institutional crisis response serves institutional interests. When those interests converge with community interests, the response may also serve the community. When they diverge, institutional interests prevail. The convergence is not guaranteed, and the conditions under which it fails are predictable.

Consider a district in which a white teacher has been identified, by community members, as engaging in a pattern of behavior consistent with misdirected agency. She has inserted herself into community organizing spaces without invitation. She has spoken on behalf of families who did not ask her to speak. She has escalated when redirected, sending emails to board members characterizing her exclusion as retaliation. The community wants the district to address the behavior. The district wants the situation to resolve. These interests appear to converge. But the mechanism through which each party wants resolution differs in ways that are structurally significant.

The community wants accountability. It wants the district to name the behavior as harmful, to implement consequences, and to demonstrate through concrete action that the institution values community self-determination over white staff comfort. The district wants containment. It wants the situation to stop generating emails, stop appearing in board meeting public comments, stop creating the conditions under which a reporter might call. The district's definition of resolution is silence. The community's definition of resolution is change.

When the district acts, it acts within its own interest framework. It may meet with the teacher privately. It may offer coaching. It may move the teacher to a different assignment where she is less likely to encounter the community members who filed the complaint. It may issue a statement affirming its commitment to equity. Each of these actions serves institutional interests: the coaching creates a paper trail that protects the district legally; the reassignment removes the immediate source of conflict without creating the due-process complications of formal discipline; the statement positions the institution as responsive without committing to specific changes.⁵ What the district is unlikely to do is the thing the community actually asked for: a public

acknowledgment that the behavior constituted harm, a concrete change in the conditions that produced the behavior, and a transfer of decision-making authority to the community about how future interactions will be structured.

The divergence is not incidental. It is structural. The institutional interests at stake, reputation management, legal liability mitigation, operational continuity, staff retention, are real institutional interests that real institutional actors have real incentives to protect. The community interests at stake, self-determination, safety, recognition of harm, structural change, are also real. The two sets of interests exist in tension, and the institution has the power to resolve that tension in its own favor while framing the resolution as equitable.

Bell anticipated this dynamic.⁶⁶ His analysis of *Brown v. Board of Education* demonstrated that the Supreme Court's decision to desegregate schools was driven not by a commitment to Black educational rights but by the convergence of those rights with Cold War-era American interests in presenting a credible image of democracy to newly independent nations in Africa and Asia. When the geopolitical interests shifted, enforcement of desegregation weakened. The analogy to institutional crisis response is precise: the district will pursue equity-aligned action to the extent that equity-aligned action serves the district's interests in reputation, stability, and legal protection. When those interests are better served by containment than by change, containment prevails.

The misdirected agency framework itself can become an instrument of institutional self-protection. This is the possibility that must be named with precision, because it represents the framework's most dangerous failure mode.

A superintendent receives a complaint from a community organizer about a white staff member's behavior. The superintendent has read this book. She is familiar with the concept of misdirected agency, with the mirror question, with the analysis of habitus and property rights. She calls the staff member into her office. She tells the staff member that the behavior reflects a habitus of whiteness, that the mirror question reveals whose interests were being served, that the pattern is consistent with the theoretical framework described in the literature. She directs the staff member to examine her own dispositions and to stop engaging with the community in ways that center white comfort.

This looks like institutional accountability. It is institutional self-protection wearing the language of critical analysis.

The superintendent has used the framework to address the individual's behavior without examining the institutional conditions that produced and rewarded that behavior. She has not asked whether the district's equity initiatives are structured in ways that invite white staff to insert themselves into community spaces. She has not asked whether the district's professional development programs train white staff to see themselves as essential mediators between the institution and communities of color. She has not asked whether the district's

hiring practices, evaluation systems, and promotion criteria reward the very pattern of equity-adjacent labor that the framework identifies as misdirected agency. She has not asked the mirror question of her own institution: whose interests does this organizational structure serve?

What the superintendent has done is deploy a critical framework to discipline an individual while leaving the structure intact. The framework becomes a tool for managing dissent within the organization. The staff member who was engaging in misdirected agency may well have needed redirection. The superintendent's use of the framework to provide that redirection, without turning the framework on the institution itself, reproduces the dynamic the framework was designed to reveal. It relocates the problem in the individual, exactly as the institution has always done, while using more sophisticated language to do so.

Harris's concept of whiteness-as-property operates here at the institutional level.⁷ The institution's authority to define what counts as appropriate staff behavior, to determine who is redirected and on what terms, to use critical frameworks selectively, deploying them against individuals while exempting the institution from the same analysis: this authority is a property right. It is the right of disposition applied to organizational knowledge. The institution determines which frameworks circulate, in what contexts they are applied, and to whom they apply. The right of exclusion operates simultaneously: the institution excludes itself from the framework's analytical reach while claiming to enact the framework's values.

Ronald Heifetz's distinction between technical and adaptive challenges provides a further lens for understanding institutional self-protection in the context of racial crisis.⁸ Technical challenges have known solutions that can be implemented through existing organizational competencies. Adaptive challenges require changes in the values, beliefs, and behaviors of the people doing the work, changes that no authority can mandate and no expertise can shortcut. Heifetz argues that the most common leadership failure is treating adaptive challenges as if they were technical ones: applying existing competencies to problems that require new learning, deploying expertise to avoid the discomfort of genuine organizational change.

Institutional responses to misdirected agency consistently display this pattern. The district treats the community complaint as a technical problem: an individual staff member whose behavior needs correction. The solution is technical: coaching, reassignment, a directive to stop the offending behavior. The complaint is processed through existing channels, handled through existing protocols, resolved through existing mechanisms. At no point does the institution engage with the adaptive dimension of the problem: the values, assumptions, and structural arrangements that produced the behavior and that will produce it again, in a different person, in a different community, under different circumstances but with identical dynamics.

Heifetz identifies this pattern as a form of work avoidance.⁹ The institution avoids adaptive work by converting it into technical work. The conversion is not experienced as avoidance by the people performing it. It is experienced as responsible institutional action. The superintendent who coaches the staff member believes

she has addressed the problem. The HR director who processes the complaint through standard channels believes the system is working. The communications director who drafts a statement affirming the district's commitment to equity believes the institution has responded. Each of these actors is performing technical work competently. None of them is engaging with the adaptive challenge, which is the institutional culture that produced the conditions under which misdirected agency was not only possible but structurally incentivized.

The work avoidance is institutional, not individual. Individual leaders within the institution may be entirely capable of adaptive engagement. They may understand, intellectually, that the complaint reflects a systemic pattern rather than an individual aberration. But the institution's protocols, communication channels, decision-making structures, and accountability mechanisms are all designed to process problems technically. The institution lacks the organizational architecture for adaptive work, not because no one has thought to build it, but because adaptive architecture would require the institution to examine its own basic assumptions, and Schein's framework tells us that basic assumptions are invisible precisely because they are shared.¹⁰

Michael Lipsky's concept of street-level bureaucracy introduces a dimension of this analysis that complicates any simple narrative of institutional self-protection.¹¹ Lipsky argues that the people who implement institutional policy, the teachers, social workers, police officers, and other front-line workers who interact directly with citizens, exercise substantial discretion in how they interpret and apply organizational directives. Policy, in Lipsky's framework, is not made at the top of the organizational hierarchy and implemented at the bottom. Policy is made, functionally, at the point of implementation, through the daily decisions of street-level bureaucrats who must reconcile contradictory directives, inadequate resources, and ambiguous situations with the need to act.

This matters for the analysis of institutional misdirected agency because it identifies a structural tension that does not resolve. The institution establishes protocols that constrain staff action. Some of those protocols exist to protect community interests: boundary policies that prevent staff from engaging in community spaces without authorization, communication guidelines that direct staff to work through established channels, professional conduct standards that define the limits of appropriate institutional behavior. Some of those same protocols exist to protect institutional interests: media policies that prevent staff from speaking publicly about institutional failures, reporting hierarchies that funnel information upward before it reaches community members, legal guidelines that prioritize institutional liability over transparent communication.

The street-level bureaucrat, the teacher or social worker or community liaison who encounters a situation of genuine community need, cannot distinguish cleanly between these two functions. The protocol that says "do not speak to the media about institutional matters" may protect the institution's reputation. It may also protect the community from inaccurate or premature public statements that could cause harm. The protocol that says "direct community complaints through official channels" may slow institutional response to the point of

uselessness. It may also ensure that complaints are documented in ways that create accountability. The same protocol serves both functions simultaneously, and the front-line worker who must decide, in real time, whether to follow the protocol or act outside it is making a judgment that no framework can automate.

This is where the analysis must resist the temptation to resolve into prescription. It would be convenient to argue that protocols that constrain staff action are always institutional self-protection, that boundary-crossing is always justified when community safety is at stake, that the responsive individual is always right and the constraining institution is always wrong. That argument would be incorrect. Some boundary-crossing by staff causes harm. Some institutional protocols prevent harm. Some staff members who believe they are acting in the community's interest are enacting misdirected agency in precisely the form this book has described. The fact that institutions sometimes protect themselves at the community's expense does not mean that every institutional constraint is self-protective, and the fact that individuals sometimes act with genuine responsiveness does not mean that every act of individual discretion serves community interests.

The tension is genuine. Institutions that give individual staff members unlimited discretion to act on their own judgment in racial crisis situations create the conditions for misdirected agency. Institutions that constrain staff action through rigid protocols create the conditions for institutional self-protection. Both dynamics harm communities, and they harm communities through opposite mechanisms. The question of which mechanism is operating in any given situation is a question of judgment, and judgment cannot be outsourced to a framework.

There is a specific racial dimension to institutional self-protection that must be named. Institutional protocols do not emerge from racially neutral organizational processes. They emerge from institutional histories that have prioritized specific interests, and those interests have been shaped by the racial composition of institutional leadership, the racial demographics of the communities the institution serves, and the racial dynamics of every prior crisis the institution has managed.

A district that serves a predominantly Black community and is led by a predominantly white leadership team will have developed crisis response protocols that reflect white institutional assumptions about what constitutes an appropriate response to racial harm.¹² These assumptions include: that silence is preferable to public acknowledgment; that legal counsel should be consulted before community engagement; that staff members who raise concerns about institutional racism are creating problems rather than identifying them; that the appropriate response to community anger is de-escalation rather than accountability; that institutional stability is more important than institutional change.

These assumptions are not policies. They are not written down. They are not voted on by school boards or ratified by community stakeholders. They are Schein's basic assumptions: the taken-for-granted beliefs that organize institutional perception and action without anyone noticing that they are beliefs rather than facts. They constitute institutional habitus, and they carry racial content whether or not anyone in the institution

experiences them as racial.¹³

Cheryl Harris's property framework operates here with particular force. The institution's authority to set the terms of crisis response, to determine what counts as an appropriate organizational reaction to racial harm, to define the boundaries within which staff may act and community members may participate: this authority is property. It carries the settled expectation of being obeyed, the right of exclusion that determines whose voice is heard in institutional decision-making, the right of disposition that determines how resources flow in the aftermath of crisis. When a community challenges this authority, when it demands that the institution respond differently, when it insists on terms of engagement that the institution did not set and does not control, the institution experiences this challenge as a disruption of settled expectations. And the response to disrupted settled expectations, as the earlier chapters of this book have established, is the reassertion of property rights through escalation, through legal mechanism, through the deployment of institutional authority to restore the conditions under which the property was undisturbed.¹⁴

The institution does not experience this as racial self-protection. It experiences it as responsible governance. The superintendent who consults legal counsel before responding to a community complaint about racial harm is being responsible. The communications director who drafts a statement that neither admits fault nor specifies remedial action is being professional. The HR director who processes the complaint through channels designed to protect the institution's legal exposure is following protocol. Each actor is performing a role that the institution has defined as appropriate. None of them is asking whose interests the definition of "appropriate" serves, or how that definition was produced, or what it costs the community to wait while the institution protects itself.

This analysis has been conducted from a position that warrants acknowledgment. The author of this book works within institutional systems. The frameworks offered here were developed within the constraints of institutional affiliation, institutional approval, and institutional reward. The analytical distance that this chapter maintains from institutional self-protection is itself a product of institutional positioning: the author occupies a role that permits this kind of critique precisely because the critique is contained within a book rather than enacted as organizational disruption. The institution that publishes this book, distributes it, and promotes it may do so without examining whether its own organizational practices reflect the dynamics described in these pages.

This is not an aside. It is a structural observation. The production of critical analysis about institutional self-protection occurs within institutions that engage in self-protection. The analyst is not outside the system being analyzed. The frameworks travel through the same institutional channels that the frameworks claim to interrogate. A book about how institutions weaponize frameworks can itself be weaponized by institutions, cited in professional development sessions as evidence that the institution takes critical self-examination

seriously, shelved alongside the district's equity policy as proof of commitment, deployed as a credential that substitutes for the structural changes the book identifies as necessary.

There is no resolution to this problem. It is the condition under which institutional critique operates.

The question of whether institutions can engage in genuine self-examination is not a question about institutional capacity. Institutions have enormous capacity. They can commission studies, hire consultants, convene task forces, produce reports, implement recommendations, and evaluate outcomes. They can do all of this with genuine competence and complete sincerity, and they can do all of this without examining a single basic assumption.

Schein is explicit on this point: basic assumptions are the hardest level of organizational culture to access because they are the level at which organizational members are least aware that assumptions exist.¹⁵ An institution can examine its artifacts, changing its logo, rewriting its mission statement, redesigning its website to feature diverse faces. An institution can examine its espoused values, revising its strategic plan to include equity commitments, adopting new language in official communications, training staff in culturally responsive practice. An institution can do all of this while the basic assumptions that organize its actual behavior remain entirely undisturbed. The assumption that the institution knows what communities need. The assumption that institutional expertise is a prerequisite for community action. The assumption that institutional order must be maintained as the precondition for institutional change. The assumption that the institution's continued existence is coterminous with the community's wellbeing.

Heifetz would call this technical work masquerading as adaptive work.¹⁶ The institution changes everything that can be changed without requiring anyone in the institution to change. It produces visible activity, demonstrable effort, measurable outcomes, and no transformation. The basic assumptions survive every initiative designed to displace them, because the initiatives are designed by people who share the assumptions.

The misdirected agency framework, applied at the institutional level, identifies this dynamic with clarity. The institution directs its organizational energy toward outcomes that serve the institution's interests while claiming to serve the community's interests. It mistakes institutional self-regard for community responsiveness. It confuses the maintenance of institutional reputation with the achievement of institutional accountability. It exercises the property rights of institutional authority, the right to define, the right to control, the right to exclude, while performing the vocabulary of shared governance and community partnership. This is misdirected agency at the organizational scale, and it operates through the same mechanism that individual misdirected agency operates through: the substitution of the agent's needs for the needs of the people the agent claims to serve.

The difference is that institutional misdirected agency is harder to see, because institutions have the power to define what counts as seeing. An individual whose misdirected agency is identified can be coached, redirected, or removed. An institution whose misdirected agency is identified can redefine the terms of the identification, can absorb the critique into its existing framework, can transform the accusation of self-protection into evidence of institutional openness by pointing to the fact that the accusation was permitted to be made. The institution metabolizes its own critique. The critique becomes another artifact in the organizational culture, another data point in the annual equity report, another entry in the institutional record of continuous improvement.

The community, meanwhile, is still waiting for something to change.

There is a final complication that this chapter will not resolve. Lipsky's street-level bureaucrats must act.¹⁷ The teacher who witnesses racial harm in a school hallway cannot wait for the institution to complete its adaptive learning process. The social worker who encounters a family in crisis cannot defer action until the district has examined its basic assumptions about crisis response. The community liaison who knows that a community meeting is being managed rather than heard cannot suspend her professional obligation to the community while filing a formal complaint through official channels. These are people who must make decisions, in real time, about whether to follow institutional protocols or to act outside them.

Sometimes following the protocol is the right decision. Sometimes the protocol exists because prior situations demonstrated that uncoordinated individual action causes more harm than institutional process, even slow and frustrating institutional process. Sometimes the staff member who believes she knows what the community needs is wrong, and the protocol that constrains her action prevents her from enacting the very pattern of misdirected agency this book describes.

Sometimes the protocol is self-protective and the staff member's judgment is correct and the community will be harmed if the institution is allowed to manage the situation through its standard channels. Sometimes boundary-crossing is the appropriate response to institutional failure. Sometimes the responsive individual who acts outside the chain of command is the only person in the system who is actually serving the community's interests.

Discerning which situation one is in requires a form of judgment that no framework can supply, including this one. The misdirected agency framework can identify patterns. It can reveal structural dynamics. It can make visible the mechanisms through which both individuals and institutions substitute their own interests for community interests. What it cannot do is tell a street-level bureaucrat, in the moment of decision, whether her impulse to act outside protocol represents genuine responsiveness to community need or the habitus of whiteness expressing itself as urgency. These two possibilities look identical from the inside. They feel identical. They are motivated by the same affective experience of distress in the face of harm. They differ only

in their structural position relative to the community's actual interests, and that structural position is precisely the thing that habitus renders invisible to the person inhabiting it.

This is not a failure of the framework. It is a condition of institutional life. The tension between institutional coordination and individual responsiveness does not resolve. Any framework that claims to resolve it is concealing an interest, and the interest it is concealing is almost certainly the interest of whoever controls the framework's deployment. If the institution controls the framework, the framework will be deployed to constrain individual action. If individuals control the framework, the framework will be deployed to justify individual discretion. The framework serves whoever wields it. This is true of the misdirected agency framework as much as it is true of any other.

The mirror question, introduced in Chapter 6, asks: whose interests does this action serve? The chapter has asked this question of institutional crisis response, of organizational protocol, of the deployment of critical frameworks within institutional contexts, and of the production of critical scholarship by institutionally affiliated authors. In each case, the answer has included the institution's interests, whether or not those interests aligned with the community's interests, and whether or not the institutional actors involved were aware that the alignment was incomplete.

The question that remains is whether an institution can ask the mirror question of itself, not through the proxy of a commissioned report or a hired consultant or the adoption of self-examination language in official communications, but whether it can actually examine its own basic assumptions, identify the interests those assumptions serve, and change the assumptions when they serve institutional interests at the community's expense.

The individual chapters of this book have suggested that individual self-examination, while difficult, is possible. Habitus can be disrupted, if not through reflection alone then through the alteration of the structural conditions that produce it. Property rights can be relinquished, if not voluntarily then through the redistribution of institutional power. Settled expectations can be unsettled, if not comfortably then through the sustained refusal of communities to perform the accommodation that settled expectations demand.

Can institutions do the same? Can an organization examine the assumptions it cannot see, disrupt the habitus it has spent decades producing, relinquish the property rights that constitute its authority, unsettle the expectations on which its operational coherence depends? Can an institution, which exists precisely to maintain continuity, engage in the discontinuity that genuine self-examination requires?

Or does the mirror question only work for individuals, while institutions, by their nature, can only perform the appearance of self-examination while the basic assumptions remain undisturbed beneath the performance, invisible, shared, and intact?

Serving Without Consuming

need to tell you something about a version of myself I do not enjoy remembering.

It was early in my career, at a district I will not name, in a building where I had been given a role that came with just enough authority to be dangerous and not nearly enough to be effective. I was an instructional coach, which meant I had opinions about everything and control over almost nothing. The gap between those two facts should have humbled me. Instead, it radicalized me. Not in any dramatic sense; I did not chain myself to a filing cabinet or start a newsletter. But I developed what I can only describe now as a kind of moral velocity, a certainty that the urgency I felt was identical to the urgency the situation required, and that anyone who did not share my pace was either complicit or asleep.

There were students in that building who were not being served well. That part was true. There were practices that needed to change, conversations that needed to happen, structures that needed examination. All of that was real. But what I did with that reality was something else entirely. I organized around it. I built coalitions in hallways and parking lots. I went to people above my supervisor because I had decided my supervisor was the problem. I framed everything I did as advocacy, and some of it was, and some of it was me discharging an anxiety I could not name into systems that did not belong to me.

I want to be precise about this, because precision matters here more than anywhere else in this book. I was not wrong about the problems. I was wrong about my role in solving them. I was wrong about what my urgency entitled me to. I was wrong about who would pay the cost for my interventions, and I was wrong about how much of what I called courage was actually a refusal to sit with the discomfort of being a person with limited power in a system that needed more change than I could deliver.

I burned relationships that took years to repair. Some of them never fully recovered. I created political conditions that made it harder, not easier, for the changes I wanted to occur. And the people who absorbed the consequences of my misdirected energy were not the administrators I was frustrated with. They were the colleagues who had trusted me, who had shared their concerns with me in confidence, who found those concerns weaponized in service of my campaign before they had consented to that use. They were the very people I told myself I was fighting for.

This is not a confession designed to earn your trust. I am not performing vulnerability so that the framework I have spent this book constructing will land with greater authority. I am telling you this because the framework is not written from a position of having figured things out. It is written from a position of having enacted these patterns, having been shaped by them, having caused harm through them, and having spent the years since trying to understand what I did and why.

I have been Mrs. Patterson. I have been the person whose genuine concern for students became entangled with my own need to act, my own discomfort with institutional pace, my own unwillingness to distinguish between what the situation required and what I required from the situation. I have felt that particular fusion of righteousness and anxiety that makes every bureaucratic delay feel like a moral emergency, every request to slow down feel like an invitation to abandon children. I know what it feels like to believe that the system's failure to move at your speed is evidence of the system's failure to care.

And I have been the institution that silenced Mrs. Patterson. I have sat in rooms where someone raised a concern that was inconvenient, and I have watched myself reframe that concern as a process violation, a tone problem, a boundary issue. I have used procedural language to contain what should have been heard as a cry of genuine alarm. I have prioritized institutional comfort over institutional honesty, and I have done it while telling myself I was being reasonable, measured, professional.

I have been both of these things. Sometimes in the same week. Sometimes, if I am being honest, in the same meeting. The capacity to see a pattern does not immunize you against enacting it. Naming misdirected agency does not prevent you from misdirecting your own. If this book has given you the impression that I stand outside these dynamics, observing them with clinical detachment, then I have failed at something fundamental, and I want to correct that failure here, in the last pages, before you close this cover.

The phrase "serving without consuming" came to me during a conversation I cannot fully reconstruct. I know it was with a colleague, and I know we were talking about the particular exhaustion that communities of color experience when white educators show up with good intentions and large appetites. Not appetites for food or money, but for emotional labor, for reassurance, for the particular kind of affirmation that says, "Yes, you are one of the good ones." The appetite to be seen as helpful, which is different from the willingness to actually help.

I have watched white educators, myself among them, enter communities with a kind of hunger that we mistake for generosity. We want to serve, and that desire is often sincere. But the serving comes with a cost that is largely invisible to us and entirely visible to the people we are serving. We consume emotional space. We consume political energy. We consume patience. We consume the willingness of people who have been burned before to extend trust one more time to one more well-meaning white person who may or may not still be around in two years.

Serving without consuming means being attentive to that cost. It means asking, with genuine openness to the answer, whether your presence in a space is adding more than it is extracting. It means recognizing that good intentions do not offset the metabolic load that your helping places on the people being helped. It means understanding that the communities you want to serve have their own agency, their own expertise, their own solutions, and that your job is often to resource those solutions rather than to supply your own.

I do not do this perfectly. I am not sure I do it well. But I have learned to ask the question, which is different from having learned the answer.

There is a version of this conclusion I considered writing and then abandoned. In that version, I would have synthesized the book's arguments into a coherent framework, offered a set of principles for practice, and closed with something that felt like resolution. It would have been tidy. It would have been useful in the way that executive summaries are useful: as a compression of complexity into actionable items.

I abandoned it because this book does not resolve. The tensions it examines are not the kind that yield to synthesis. They are permanent tensions, structural tensions, tensions that exist because the work itself contains contradictions that cannot be eliminated, only managed.

The tension between institutional coordination and responsive action. Between the need for systems that function predictably and the need for people who can respond to what is actually happening in front of them, even when what is happening does not fit the system's categories. Mrs. Patterson saw something real. The institution's response was inadequate. But the solution is not simply to empower every Mrs. Patterson to act unilaterally, because unilateral action in complex systems creates its own harms, as I know from personal experience. The solution, if there is one, lives somewhere in the negotiation between these competing needs, and that negotiation is never finished.

The tension between accountability and compassion. Between the recognition that misdirected agency causes real harm and the recognition that the people who enact it are often motivated by genuine care. I have spent this book asking you to look clearly at patterns that cause damage, and I have tried to do that without losing sight of the human beings caught in those patterns. I am not confident I have succeeded. The line between naming a pattern and judging the person who enacts it is thinner than I would like, and I have probably crossed it in places I cannot see.

The tension between naming patterns and weaponizing the naming. This one keeps me up at night. I have given you a vocabulary: misdirected agency, groove theory, the helper's bind, white institutional paternalism. These terms are meant to make certain dynamics visible so they can be examined, interrupted, redirected. But I know how institutional language works. I know that the moment you give people a label, some of them will use it as a weapon. Somewhere, someone will read this book and use "misdirected agency" to dismiss a colleague whose concerns are legitimate and whose urgency is warranted. Somewhere, an administrator will invoke "groove theory" to pathologize a teacher who is simply trying to advocate for a student. I cannot prevent that. I can only name the risk, which I am doing now, and ask you to hold the framework with the care it requires.

These tensions are not problems I have failed to solve. They are features of the work. They are what makes educational leadership a moral practice rather than a technical one. If the tensions could be resolved by a framework, we would not need judgment, discernment, relationship, or the slow accumulation of trust that allows people to tell each other the truth without destroying each other in the process.

Here is what I have learned, provisionally, with all the qualifiers that word implies.

Naming misdirected agency makes it marginally more interruptible. Marginally. That qualifier matters. I want to resist the temptation to overstate the power of naming, because overstating it would be its own form of misdirected agency: the scholar's version, the belief that if you can describe a problem with sufficient precision, you have done something meaningful about it. Sometimes you have. Sometimes you have only given the problem a more elegant container.

But marginally is not nothing. I have watched people, myself included, catch themselves mid-pattern because they had a name for what they were doing. I have watched a teacher pause before sending an email up the chain and ask herself whether she was advocating for a student or discharging her own frustration. I have watched an administrator stop himself from invoking procedure and instead say, "Tell me more about what you are seeing." These are small moments. They do not restructure systems or redistribute power. But they change the texture of interaction in ways that matter to the people in the room, and the people in the room are often students, or the adults those students depend on.

I have learned that the grooves do not disappear when you become aware of them. They just become something you can work with: patterns you recognize, interruptions you can make, corrections you can attempt

before the cost is paid by someone else. I still feel the pull of urgency. I still feel the fusion of moral conviction and personal anxiety that makes institutional patience feel like institutional indifference. I still want to go around the slow parts and get to the part where something changes. The difference, now, is that I sometimes notice the wanting before I act on it, and in that gap between impulse and action, there is occasionally enough room to choose differently.

Occasionally. Not always. Not even most of the time. But occasionally, and that is worth something, even if what it is worth cannot be measured or reported or included in a strategic plan.

I have also learned something about what students in crisis actually need, and it is less dramatic than the narratives we tell ourselves.

Students in crisis need adults who are warm, structured, and consistent. Who show up on Tuesday the same way they showed up on Monday. Who do not perform their caring in grand gestures but embed it in routine, in the quiet architecture of a classroom where expectations are clear and relationships are real and the implicit message, never spoken but always communicated, is: this space holds. You are not too much for this room. Your presence here is not a problem to be managed. It is the reason the room exists.

That is not a lesser contribution than the dramatic interventions we tend to celebrate. The teacher who maintains a predictable, warm classroom for 180 days is doing something more important than the teacher who makes one heroic phone call. The administrator who builds a schedule that gives struggling students access to consistent adults is doing something more important than the administrator who stays late one night to handle a crisis. Consistency is not glamorous. It does not generate the kind of stories we tell at conferences. But it is what children who have experienced instability need most, and providing it requires a discipline that I think we undervalue precisely because it is so quiet.

I have come to believe that much of what we celebrate as advocacy in schools is actually a failure of systems, made visible by the willingness of individuals to compensate for that failure through personal heroism. And personal heroism is real, and it matters, and I do not want to diminish it. But I want to ask whether we have built systems that require heroism as a condition of functioning, and whether that requirement is itself a form of institutional neglect that we have learned to narrate as institutional strength.

When we celebrate the teacher who moves mountains for one student, we should also ask why the mountains were there. When we admire the counselor who works until midnight to connect a family with services, we should also ask why connecting families with services requires working until midnight. The heroism is real. The conditions that necessitate it are a choice, or more precisely, the accumulated result of many choices, made over many years, by many people, most of whom were not trying to create the conditions they created.

I want to return to Mrs. Patterson one last time. Not to her story, which this book has examined from enough angles. But to what she represents, which is something I have tried to hold with care throughout these pages and which I am not sure I have held carefully enough.

She represents the reality that genuine concern for children and misdirected institutional action can coexist in the same person, in the same moment, without either one being false. She represents the difficulty of responding to that coexistence with anything resembling adequacy. She represents the cost that is paid when institutions cannot hear legitimate alarm because it arrives in a form that triggers institutional self-protection. And she represents the cost that is paid when individual urgency overrides institutional coordination in ways that create new harms while attempting to address old ones.

I did not write this book to judge Mrs. Patterson. I wrote it because the patterns she enacted, and the patterns the institution enacted in response to her, are patterns I have seen repeated across enough contexts to believe they are structural rather than personal, predictable rather than random, and therefore at least partially addressable. Whether this book contributes to addressing them is not something I can determine from inside the writing. That determination belongs to you, and to the communities you serve, and to the students whose daily experience of school is shaped by decisions that adults make in rooms those students never enter.

I want to sit with one more question before I close, and I want to sit with it honestly, which means I cannot answer it.

Is this book serving the people I am trying to serve, or is it serving my need to feel like I am doing something?

I do not know. I genuinely do not know. I have spent years on this work, and I believe it describes something real, and I believe the descriptions are useful, and I believe that the frameworks offered here can help people think more clearly about dynamics that are otherwise difficult to see. All of that may be true, and it may also be true that the primary beneficiary of this project is me: my career, my sense of purpose, my need to transform personal failure into professional contribution, my desire to believe that the relationships I damaged early in my career were not simply damaged but were, in some retroactive way, research.

That is an uncomfortable thought, and I am not going to resolve it by performing discomfort for your benefit. I am going to leave it here, where it belongs, as a question that applies not only to this book but to every act of helping, every intervention, every framework, every conference presentation, every professional development session, every time someone stands in front of a room and says, "Here is what I have learned about how to do this work better."

The question is never fully answerable. But it is always worth asking, and the willingness to ask it, to genuinely sit with the possibility that your helping is serving your needs more than theirs, is perhaps the only

reliable check against the patterns this book describes.

I said at the beginning of this chapter that I burned relationships early in my career. I want to add something to that, because the story is not complete without it.

Some of those relationships came back, over years, through the slow and unglamorous work of showing up differently, of apologizing without qualification, of demonstrating through sustained behavior that I had learned something from what I had done. The repair happened in small moments: a hallway exchange where I asked instead of asserted, a meeting where I deferred instead of claimed, a decision to stay quiet when everything in me wanted to speak.

Some did not come back. The ones that did not are the ones I return to, because the question of whether they could have been repaired if I had understood earlier what the Mirror Question asks is the question I cannot resolve, and the inability to resolve it is not a lesson. It is a cost. The people who chose not to rebuild that trust made a reasonable choice based on what I had shown them about who I was, and their choice is not a failure of the framework. It is a consequence of what the framework exists to prevent.

I tell you this not because the repair redeems the harm. It does not. The harm was real, and the people who experienced it did not owe me the opportunity to repair it. I tell you this because repair is possible, and because the possibility of repair is itself a kind of hope that I think this work requires. Not optimism, which is a prediction about the future, but hope, which is a commitment to acting as though the future can be different from the past even when the evidence is ambiguous.^[^1]

The evidence, in my experience, is always ambiguous. The systems we work in are resistant to change in ways that are discouraging on good days and demoralizing on bad ones. The patterns described in this book are durable, self-reinforcing, and deeply embedded in the institutional cultures we inhabit. Naming them does not dissolve them. Frameworks do not restructure power. Books do not save children.

But people do. Imperfect, complicated, sometimes misdirected people who care enough to keep showing up, who are willing to be wrong and to learn from being wrong, who can hold the tension between urgency and patience without collapsing in either direction. People who can serve without consuming. Or, more honestly, people who are trying to learn how to serve without consuming, who fail at it regularly, and who keep trying anyway, not because they believe they will eventually get it right but because the trying itself is a form of respect for the communities they serve.

I do not have a final declaration. I do not have a call to action. I have spent six books^[^2] trying to describe the interior architecture of how institutions respond to transformation, how people move through change, how agency gets misdirected when the separation between what is needed and what is possible becomes unbearable. I have tried to do this with honesty and care, and I have probably fallen short in ways I cannot see, and I am

going to have to be at peace with that, the way we all have to be at peace with the divide between our intentions and our impact.

Here is what I will leave you with, and it is not a conclusion so much as a question I think we should carry forward together.

The institution we serve: is it worthy of the trust we ask others to place in it? When we ask families to send their children to our schools, when we ask communities to believe that we are acting in their interest, when we ask teachers to invest their professional lives in systems we have designed, are those systems worthy of that trust? And if they are not, fully, what is our obligation? Not to burn them down, because institutions, for all their failures, are the structures through which collective action becomes possible. But not to accept them uncritically, either, because uncritical acceptance is its own form of misdirected agency: the choice to direct your energy toward maintaining what exists rather than examining whether what exists is sufficient.

That question does not have a final answer. It requires ongoing examination, the kind that is uncomfortable and slow and resistant to the metrics we use to determine whether we are making progress. It requires us to stay in the work long enough to see the patterns, and to stay honest enough to name our own participation in them, and to stay humble enough to know that naming is not the same as solving.

I have not solved anything in these pages. I have tried to describe something clearly enough that it becomes a little more visible, a little more interruptible, a little more possible to work with rather than be worked by. Whether I have succeeded is not mine to judge.

The grooves remain. The work continues. The students are waiting for us to show up, not with grand gestures or heroic interventions, but with the quiet, sustained, imperfect presence that says: I am here. I will be here tomorrow. This room holds.

That is enough. It has to be.

[^1]: This distinction between optimism and hope draws loosely on Cornel West's framing, particularly in his conversations about the difference between American optimism, which depends on evidence, and deep democratic hope, which persists in the absence of evidence. I find this distinction useful in educational contexts where the evidence for systemic change is often discouraging.

[^2]: This is the sixth volume in the *Interior Architecture of Transformation* series, following books on institutional identity, resistance, adaptive capacity, trust architecture, and power dynamics.

