



slow down

A ZINE FOR
HELPERS ON
NAVIGATING
SAVIOURISM

Macayla Yan

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Land Acknowledgement

Before delving into the zine, I want to take a moment to acknowledge that I am occupying the ancestral homelands of the ləkʷəŋən Nation, which is presently known as the Songhees (songheesnation.ca) and Esquimalt (esquimaltnation.ca) First Nations due to the destructive nature of colonization. As a settler, I am inherently complicit in settler colonialism and thoroughly indebted to the rightful stewards of the land and waters. This acknowledgement cannot take away the violence of my existence here. Instead, it serves as a starting point to orient myself and readers to the work that follows, as well as a statement of accountability to the local Nations. As I breathe into my reflections, I feel the profound losses and resiliencies on this land throughout the generations. The relationships on this territory that predate colonization will continue far past the elimination of settler colonialism.



Whose lands are you on?

I encourage you to also take the time to connect to the lands upon which you are currently situated and the local Nation(s) who have been stewarding the territory for generations. native-land.ca and the website of local Nation(s) are helpful resources. As you reflect on and embody the territory acknowledgement, notice what gets stirred inside you.



Defining Helper



Helpers are people who help others, whether in a formal position or informal relationship. Not all helpers adopt saviourism and not all saviours are helpers, but there is some overlap.

This zine* focuses on professional helpers, such as:

- Counsellors/psychologists
- Social workers
- Educators
- Frontline support workers (e.g., with youth, disabled individuals, unhoused folks)
- Program developers
- Peer support workers
- Health care providers

However, it may also be useful for:

- Volunteers
- Researchers
- Nonprofit staff and directors
- Friends
- Community members
- Partners
- Family members
- Activists/allies
- Others?

Where do you fit?

(1, 2)

References

***Zine** = self-published magazine, often created by one person or a small group of people on a particular topic of interest. Zines typically possess explicit political stances.

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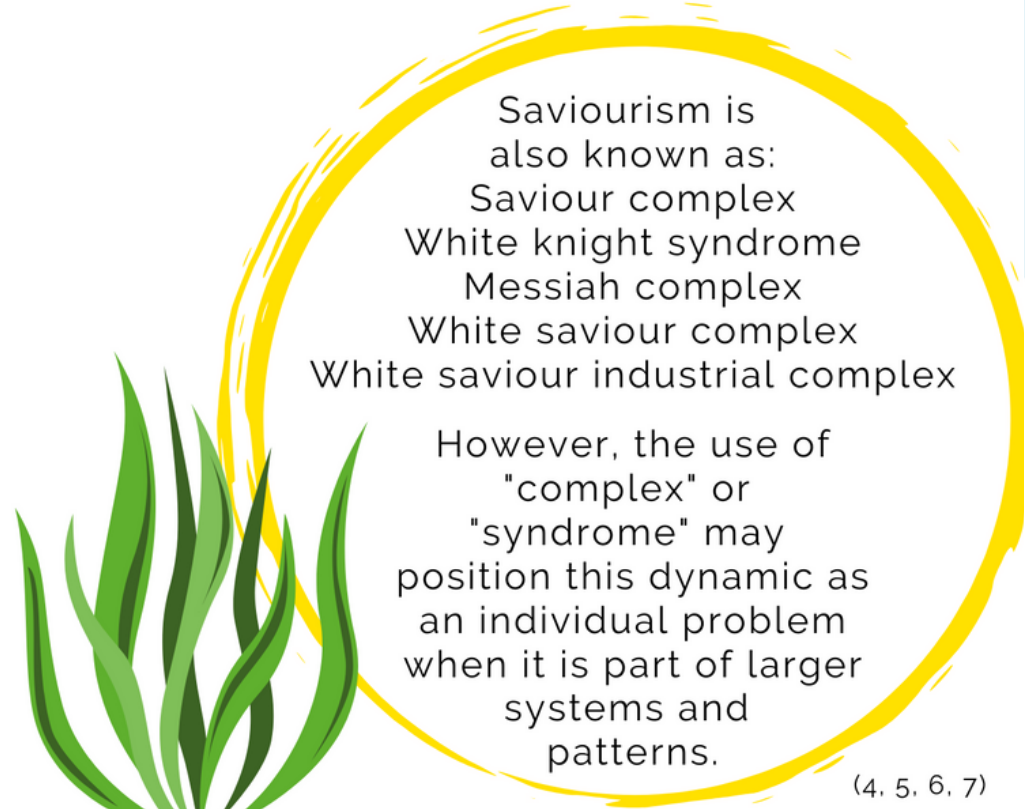
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This zine is meant to be a dialogue, so you are encouraged to write/draw all over it and discuss the contents with others! Take your time with it.
.....

I want to take a moment to acknowledge all of the people who helped make this zine possible. Thank you to my mentors, friends, and colleagues who contributed ideas, edits, and words of support. And infinite gratitude to the Elders, community members, scholars, and activists who are foundational to the development of my understandings of these topics. References are in brackets at the bottom of each page. Full list at macayla.info.

Defining Saviourism

Saviourism can be conceptualized as a relational dynamic wherein the person(s) with more power and privilege "saves" or "rescues" those who hold less power or are viewed as "unfortunate" from negative situations or even themselves.

Saviourism often occurs within existing unequal power structures, including systems of oppression and helper-client relationships. As such, for ethical practice, it must be considered through anti-colonial, socially just frameworks.



Saviourism is also known as:
Saviour complex
White knight syndrome
Messiah complex
White saviour complex
White saviour industrial complex

However, the use of "complex" or "syndrome" may position this dynamic as an individual problem when it is part of larger systems and patterns.

(4, 5, 6, 7)

Signs of Saviourism

- Positioning of the saviour as an expert who must take the lead and does not need to accept direction or guidance from the people they are helping.
- Disregard for the oppressive forces that marginalize certain populations.
- Neglecting the agency (autonomy) and capabilities of those being served.
- Intense desire to "fix" the lives of racialized, Indigenous, disabled, poor, and otherwise oppressed peoples.
- Implicit or explicit self-importance and hyper-availability.
- Drawn to marginalized peoples.
- Drive to help others to fulfill own needs (e.g., to avoid or heal own struggles).

I encourage you to be honest and vulnerable with yourself as you consider where you recognize these signs.

(4, 5, 6, 7)

Examples of Saviourism in Action

A white social worker who decides it is their life mission to "rescue" Indigenous and other racialized children from impoverished conditions.

A counsellor who tries to "save" people living with addiction from themselves and their "bad choices."

A program for recent high school graduates to travel to a formerly colonized nation to teach locals about human rights.

A campaign to promote the inclusion of people with disabilities because they are "helpless."

A wealthy psychologist who "parachutes" into poor communities to "fix" their issues.

Add your own examples:

How can you discern between saviourism and being of service to others?

Roots of Saviourism



Saviourism can be explained by two different but often interacting processes.

Attachment theory states that when our needs are not met in attachment relationships (e.g., with caregivers or romantic partners), we learn to develop strategies to cope with this struggle. One strategy our nervous systems employ is to try to please or caretake others for attention and approval.

(8)

Colonialism is a system of domination where imperial forces objectify and marginalize people through mentalities, narratives, ideologies, and structures to justify land, resource, and labour theft. For example, the "white man's burden" is defined as the task of white people to civilize and save Black and brown people around the world from savagery and ignorance. Much of global colonialism is also founded on Christianity, which espouses strong saviour tropes to legitimize its imposition. Colonial forces construct hierarchies of value and power that determine who is superior and who needs saving.

(5, 9)

Note: While attachment experiences may not be relevant, colonialism is always an important factor.

White Supremacy Culture

Colonialism is upheld by white supremacy culture. **White supremacy culture** is the system of beliefs, norms, standards, values, and practices that positions whiteness as supreme and the measure by which all other people are judged. White supremacy culture is infused in all of the institutions and structures of colonial society.

Individualism = valuing the individual person as the most important unit in society, neglecting our inherent interdependence within larger systems.

I'm the only one = the belief that for something to get done right 'I' must control or do it myself.

Qualified = the attitude that those who are qualified (e.g., through education or power) must improve or fix what is "broken."

Paternalism/power hoarding = power is limited and concentrated, and those with power get to make decisions and define standards for those without.

Perfectionism = the belief that people can and should strive to be perfect according to a determined standard or status quo. It can show up as the focus on mistakes or failures as defining a person.

One right way = the belief that there is only one right way to do things and if people do not conform, there is something wrong with them.

Urgency = the practice of seeking immediacy, expediency, and timeliness, often superseding the need for rest, reflection, and breath.

Binaries = the assumption of either/or, erasing nuances of life.

Linear progress = valuing success as doing/ being/ achieving more and more such that quantity is prioritized over quality.

Also notable:
Denial/defensiveness in the face of truth regarding injustice.
Right to comfort for those with power.



Tangible Violence of Saviourism

Perpetuating power relations

- Further entrenches power differentials between helpers and the people they serve.
- Reinforces larger systemic power dynamics (e.g., colonialism, racism, ableism, etc.).
- Emphasizes the expertise of the saviour.
- Forces a "power over" situation.

Harming service receivers

- Thrives off of perceived helplessness and dependency.
- Potentially leads to resistance/pathologization of others' assertions of their own power and agency.
- Treats clients as the objects of healing/rescuing.

Modelling a damaging way of helping

- Normalizes and teaches others saviourism is an acceptable form of helping.
- Contributes to the mentalities, narratives, ideologies, and structures of saviourism.

Meeting the needs of the saviour

- Tends to be reactive and self-serving rather than intentionally centring those receiving services.
- Temporarily fulfills a desire to be needed, important, helpful, liked, valued, validated, etc.
- Impacts decision-making, priorities, goals, definitions of success, and the helping relationship.

May be explicit and/or implicit

(4, 5, 6, 7)

Thoughts, reflections, additions?

Alternatives for Engagement

1. Recognize your own humanity

Take responsibility: honestly reflect on whether you are engaging in saviourism. If yes, slow down with humility (humbleness) and take accountability (see next page).

How can you practice accountability?

Identify personal growth areas: take the time to work on respecting your own limits, healing attachment wounds, unlearning internalized superiority, and/or anything else that may be contributing to your saviourism.

Where are your growing edges?

(4, 6, 8, 14, 15, 16)



Accountability is an active, self-directed process that acknowledges all humans make mistakes and are capable of harming another person. In other words, you need to hold yourself accountable even if no one else has confronted you about your behaviour. Accountability is about taking the opportunity to be in just relationships with one another, not punishment.

The four main parts of accountability are:

1. **Self-reflection**, which is necessary throughout the process to understand and guide our behaviours

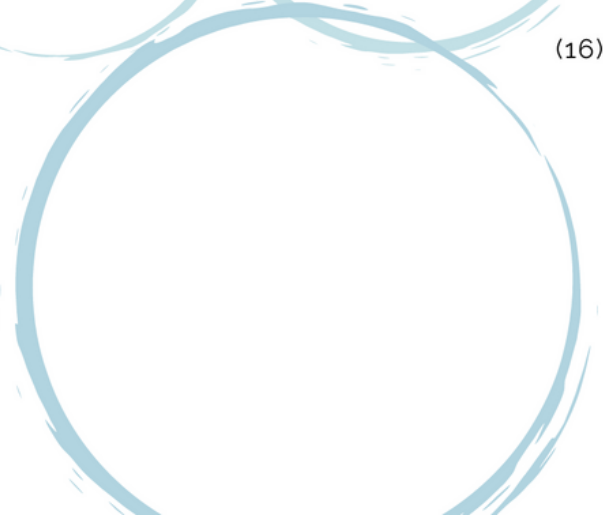
2. **Apologizing**, offering a genuine acknowledgement of how you harmed another

3. **Repair**, the process of making amends and rebuilding trust

4. **Behaviour change**, which can require shifting old habits and is often easier with the support of others

Who can you call on to be on your **accountability team**, the people in your life with whom you can discuss accountability, mistakes, and how to do better?

(16)



2. Honour the humanity of others

Share power: recognize the strengths and power of others by deferring to their expertise, upholding their agency, and following their guidance. Keep in mind your role is to serve, not rescue.

Practice noninterference: a collaborative, consent-based way of being in good relationship that refrains from coercion and releases ownership of outcomes.

Bring others into this conversation: remember others' capacity to learn and grow, and talk to those around you about saviourism, including colleagues, supervisors, mentees, etc.

Who would you like to discuss this topic with?

How can you encourage others to also practice self-accountability?

How can you approach the conversation in a way that facilitates respectful engagement?



What strengths can you identify and draw upon in the people you serve?

How do you want to be in relationship with others?

(12, 14, 15, 17)



3. Practice ethically

Holding both: as helping professionals, we must consider both personal and professional ethical guidelines, including codes of ethics and individual/collective values.

How can you practice more ethically?

The zone of fabulousness: the person-centred space of connection where practitioners do not position themselves too closely (the hero) or detach too distantly (the cynic) from service receivers.

Who can you consult with?

(18)

Mandatory ethics = minimum requirements, often prescribed by professional codes of ethics

Aspirational ethics = optimal moral and ethical behaviour, often more subjective and ideal than mandatory ethics

(19)

4. Work towards structural change

Alter the context: hold a multisystemic perspective on individual struggle to understand the necessity for changing the conditions which harm and hinder the people you serve.

How can you leverage your position, power, and privilege?

(4, 6, 12, 14, 15, 20)

Direct action: specific, transformative changes you can make within your direct sphere of influence, such as relationships, policies, practices, etc.

How can you contribute to change with others?

Dismantle systems of oppression: challenge and abolish colonial and violent forces that marginalize and oppress the people you want to serve, as well as advocate for and co-create a more just world.

Develop relationships of solidarity: become a co-struggler working alongside people in your communities, including team members and the people you serve.

What dreams do you have for your communities?

(4, 6, 12, 14, 15, 20)



Learning Reflections

What stood out to you?

What do you want to change within yourself?

What strengths do you bring to this learning?

Within your relationships?

Where do you want to expand your learnings?

Within larger systems and structures?





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