

Developing Capacity for Critical Self Reflection when Race is Salient

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Abstract: This experiential session engages participants through multiple ways of knowing in reflecting critically on how to develop personal capacity for communicating about white privilege, race and racism. The session is designed for white people's particular needs, but everyone is welcome.

This experiential session is intended for white people who are interested in sharpening their conscious awareness about how unexamined assumptions and emotional attachment to self-concept can distort critical self-reflection when white privilege, race or racism is salient. People of color are welcome, and we emphasize that the session is rooted in the context of our experience as white people who are trying to become more aware of how we are limited by hegemony and privilege.

We identify four premises that shape this experiential session. The first two are presuppositions on which the third is based. The third premise describes the session's content—participants thinking critically about three interrelated issues that affect their communications when race is salient. The fourth premise guides our design of the session. We list the premises before discussing them and conclude with a brief overview of the session activities.

1. White people are deeply embedded in meaning perspectives that make it difficult for us to perceive how white privilege affects our lives and the lives of others.
2. When white people begin to understand the injustices perpetrated by our participation in systems of privilege, we often seek to become change agents who will correct these injustices. Effectiveness as an agent for change is enhanced when white people practice critical humility, a dialogic practice of communicating and acting with confidence while remaining humble about what one does not know.
3. White people are aided in developing critical humility in discourse about race, racism, and white privilege by systematically examining three interrelated issues: personal stake in maintaining particular self identities, impact of context on the role of privilege, and personal purpose in the particular communication.
4. Learning from critical reflection on personal meaning perspectives is facilitated when learning activities tap the learners' intuitive and emotional ways of knowing.

White Supremacist Consciousness Is a Powerful Meaning Perspective

Our² first premise is that white people are deeply embedded in the meaning perspective of white supremacist consciousness, and as a result find it difficult to perceive how white privilege affects our² lives and the lives of others. We begin this section by explaining what we mean by white supremacist consciousness and why we use the term, followed by our description of the link between this consciousness and perspectives on privilege, race and racism.

White Supremacist Consciousness is a Profound Unconsciousness

Our thinking about white supremacist consciousness grows from our work as an inquiry group. We are six white European Americans who, as individuals, are adult education practitioners in a variety of institutional and community settings. We have worked as a group since 1998, seeking to change our relationship to white hegemony and institutionalized racism.

We follow the lead of U.S. scholars of color (Delgado, 1995) in adopting the term white supremacist consciousness. In spite of the fact that the United States is increasingly multi-cultural and multi-racial, it remains rooted tenaciously in the colonizing influences of Great Britain and other western European countries. The system of thought that springs from these roots, and persists today, is white supremacist consciousness, a web of assumptions based on values and beliefs held by white, Protestant colonists that have evolved and been normalized. Because consciousness that assumes cultural normalcy is invisible to those who hold it, white supremacist consciousness manifests a profound *unconsciousness* about race privilege and hegemony.

The distinction between *white supremacist consciousness* and *white supremacist* is important. “White supremacist” refers to a person who believes that white people are superior human beings. “White supremacist *consciousness*” refers not to a person, but to the system of thought that grows out of the values and norms associated with the nation's white founders. Emphasizing that we refer to a system of thought and not to people, we note that not all white people in the United States consciously or unconsciously subscribe to these norms, nor are these norms and values exclusive to whites. Through the process of cultural imperialism, some people of color have also internalized these standards.

Although our experiential session focuses on race and race privilege, we note that white supremacist consciousness permeates multiple realms of thought and behavior by people who view the world through its frame (Ani, 1994). Aspects of this consciousness—such as dualistic thinking, the privileging of the individual, and the presumption that white values are universal—manifest in all aspects of US society, from the treatment of the environment to efforts to transplant U.S. style democracy to other cultures (Paxton, 2003).

Meaning Schemes Used to Understand Race and Privilege

Moving from the general perspective of white supremacist consciousness to specific meaning schemes³ on race and privilege, our group turns to Ruth Frankenberg (1993), who identifies three points of view held by different segments of white dominant society. The first is *essentialist racism*, in which races are perceived as unequal within systems of white superiority. Essentialist racism is the meaning scheme held by white supremacists. The second point of view, *evasiveness*, includes two components. *Color evasiveness* is a meaning scheme in which people deny that there are any differences among races; *power evasiveness* is the scheme that allows people to discount the impact of historical factors and structural inequity. Within color evasiveness, since all people are assumed to be the same and race is therefore irrelevant, white people take-for-granted that personal norms are universal. From this belief, it follows that others' norms are deviant. White people with a meaning scheme of power evasiveness do not see how they have benefited from race-based privilege. In both cases, evasiveness arises from and perpetuates the profound unconsciousness that characterizes white supremacist consciousness. In Frankenberg's third viewpoint, *race cognizance*, race is recognized as salient. Race and associated cultural practices are perceived as different, but uniquely valuable. We believe that a meaning scheme of race cognizance is requisite to becoming effective as a change agent.

Expanding Consciousness

Transforming a consciousness as invisible as white supremacist consciousness provides great challenge. Our second and third premises break the challenge into two parts.

Tackling the Challenge with Critical Humility

Our second premise explains the function of critical humility. Through our cooperative inquiry process, with ourselves as the subjects of our own research, we have noticed that as we struggle to inhabit the perspective of race cognizance, we often manifest attitudes and behaviors that interfere with our well-intended efforts to work toward racial justice. We notice that we are often tempted to see ourselves as having "arrived" at an end destination where we have achieved a properly transformed white consciousness. We like to think we "get it" because we have "done our work." Another temptation is to tell other white people, from our perspective of wise authority, how they ought to think and act. We proselytize. We also rush to negative judgment when we meet white people who are less evolved in their race consciousness than we perceive ourselves to be. We may decide they are not worthy of our time and try to distance ourselves from them. All of these temptations are counter-productive to effecting change. Striving to practice critical humility is our response to these temptations.

Developing a dialogical consciousness that we call *critical humility* (European American Collaborative Challenging Whiteness, 2005a, 2005b) helps us be more open in our approach to communicating what we have learned about white supremacist consciousness. We define critical humility as the practice of remaining open to discovering that our knowledge is partial and evolving while at the same time being committed and confident about our knowledge and action in the world. The two parts of this definition capture the paradox with which we struggle and, we assume, with which white adult educator colleagues may also struggle. If we are to hold ourselves accountable for acting, we must have confidence that knowledge shaping our action is valid. At the same time, knowing that our knowledge is distorted by hegemony and probable self-deception, we need to be on constant alert about limits to the validity of our knowing, and consequently, to the merit of our actions.

Excavating Assumptions and Meaning Perspectives Related to Self Identity

The third premise posits that examining three interrelated issues, all related to self-identity, can be instrumental in developing capacity for critical humility. This premise is rooted in our beliefs about transformative learning—a process of making visible perspectives and assumptions that have been invisible and recognizing distortions in belief systems so that we can create and internalize more appropriate ones. Because a web of epistemic, sociolinguistic, and psychological factors (Mezirow, 1991, pp. 41-56, 118-144) shapes white people's relationship to race, their belief systems about race, racism, and white privilege are exceedingly difficult to excavate and change. "When inadequate meaning schemes involve self-concept, we fill this void by compensation, projection, rationalization, or other forms of self-deception" (1991, p. 44). Negotiating the pitfalls of self-deception is challenging.

We have devised questions that we find helpful in detecting our personal self-deceptions (See Figure 1). We believe these questions can help other teachers and learners first to identify and then to explore factors that confound their efforts to negotiate the paradox of being confident enough to act while staying open to the need for continual learning and self-examination. The

questions guide reflection about self-identity and values, the role of privilege, the purpose of actions, and the self-reflective process.

These guidelines are useful both for examining one's own beliefs and practices as well as for engaging others in examining theirs. In practice, they are used more for reflection-on-action, either prospectively or retrospectively, than as a viable guide to reflection-in-action³. However, by diligent effort, adults can gradually develop capacity to integrate these guides for reflective practice in a way that enables reflection-in-action.

I. *Self-identity and Values:*

- What are all of the self-identities that might be operating and at risk in this situation? (e.g., competent teacher, understanding parent, “good” person, anti-racist ally, etc.) Are there competing or contradicting values or identities involved?
- Where do I feel threatened? What am I scared about?
- What attracts me in this situation?
- What is the identity label I seek to avoid? How do I see myself as different from others in this situation?
- What are the costs and benefits of changing self-identity? How are these costs related to feelings of self-worth?

II. *Role of Privilege:*

- What is the privilege operating in the situation? Acknowledging that we all have multiple identities, which ones are salient here?
- In what ways am I resisting perceiving myself in a dominant position?
- Is the context indifferent to my identity? Does it reinforce or reject my identity?

III. *Purpose:*

- What is the phenomenon I wish to change?
- To what extent is my purpose aligning with or threatening my self-identity(ies)?
- How might I be perpetuating the phenomenon I wish to change in this situation?

IV. *Self-Reflective Process:*

(The questions above require critical self-reflection. If a learner is stuck or confused about the first three sets of questions, the questions below may be helpful. In our experience, feeling lost or confused is part of the process.)

- To what extent have I disclosed myself, allowed myself to be vulnerable to new learning?
- How am I similar to that which I am criticizing?
- Can I catch a glimpse of what I didn't know that I didn't know?
- Do I truly believe that I don't hold all of the answers? How is my information incomplete?
- How patient am I with myself about being wrong? How compassionate?

Figure 1. Questions that Guide the Practice of Critical Humility. Adapted from European-American Collaborative Challenging Whiteness (2005a).

Engaging Multiple Ways of Knowing as an Aid to Critical Reflection

Our fourth premise influences the design for the experiential session. We believe that critical self-reflection is more potent when stimulated and supported by multiple ways of knowing. Many learning theorists have noted that the process of unearthing unidentified assumptions and hidden meaning perspectives requires multiple ways of knowing:

The phrase “multiple ways of knowing” has great currency in contemporary adult education discourse. A steady drumbeat of studies documents the importance of the affective as an important element in the transformative learning process (Hunter, 1980; Egan, 1985; Scott, 1991; Clark, 1993; Taylor, 1994; Barlas, 2000)... Many educators critique the hegemonic force of an epistemology that privileges rationality. For example, ... Mary Stone Hanley (Tisdell, Hanley, & Taylor, 2000) characterizes Anglocentric culture as emotionally repressed and argues that over-reliance on the mind limits learning. (Yorks & Kasl, 2002, p. 184)

Over-reliance on the mind limits learning because rational analysis is a poor conduit to the emotional tenor of life experiences. In their conceptual map of how intuitive and imaginal ways of knowing foster transformative change, adult educators Lyle Yorks and Elizabeth Kasl (2006) document through rich description from multiple case studies the power inherent in these ways of knowing for bringing emotional material into consciousness. Thus, intuitive and imaginal ways of knowing are important precursors to the process of critically reflecting on previously unexamined assumptions. Yorks and Kasl use the model developed by John Heron (1992) to frame their theoretical understanding of multiple ways of knowing. Heron describes an extended epistemology that accounts for how a phenomenological encounter with lived experience, which is pre-linguistic, is first expressed in non-analytic ways and ultimately examined critically, for the purpose of formulating conceptual understanding that serves as a basis for new behaviors. The session plan follows Heron’s model.

Plan for Experiential Session

Opening: Session facilitators introduce concepts with short dramatization that includes characters who are personifications of educators' unexamined assumptions.

Identify an incident from personal experience: Through guided meditation, participants identify a difficult personal experience when race, racism or privilege was salient. After identifying the incident, still working alone, participants use art inquiry to re-engage with the tenor of their emotional experience during the incident.

Use questions to guide the practice of critical humility: Working in trios, one participant shares his or her experience. Group uses guiding questions to explore assumptions that had an impact on the interaction and tries out alternatives that might have contributed to greater success in the problematic interaction. As time permits, others share and group repeats.

Full group debriefing of participants' experience with the guiding questions.

Notes

1. The European-American Collaborative Challenging Whiteness fosters research and learning about the subject of White Supremacist Consciousness. The use of collective authorship under the name of the Collaborative reflects our understanding of the way in which knowledge is constructed. Members came together originally through their association with a cultural

consciousness project at the California Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco; members are: Carole Barlas, Elizabeth Kasl, Alec MacLeod, Doug Paxton, Penny Rosenwasser and Linda Sartor. Inquiries about the Collaborative's work can be addressed to: collaborative@eccw.org. Find further information at our website: <http://www.iconoclastic.net/eccw/>

2. In this paper first-person plural pronouns such as "we" and "our" are used with multiple referents. They may refer either to "us" as authors or to "us" as members of the larger category white people. Although it is tempting to resolve this ambiguity by reserving first-person pronouns for our group and third-person forms for white-people-in-general, the result might imply that we are separate and perhaps see ourselves as superior to other white people. Instead, we have chosen ambiguity, with apologies for any potential confusion.

3. We credit our use of the terms meaning perspective and meaning scheme to Jack Mezirow (1991) and the terms reflection-on-action and reflection-in-action to Donald Schön (1987).

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