

ARTICLE

When first-person inquiry is not enough

Challenging whiteness through first- and second-person inquiry

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ABSTRACT

We explore the ways second-person inquiry supports, deepens, and enhances first-person inquiry when an emotionally laden identity issue is at stake. The identity issue from which we draw our argument is the impact of one's own white supremacist consciousness on oneself and others. Using detailed accounts of three individual inquirers' experience, we examine how second-person inquiry provides support for the first-person inquirer's capacity for critical humility as well as the inquirers' abilities to: live in the inquiry, practice new behaviors and unlearn old ones, reflect-in-action, conceptualize new learning, stay open to a range of emotional responses.

KEY WORDS

- cooperative inquiry
- critical humility
- race
- transformative learning
- white identity
- white supremacist consciousness

Introduction

We are six scholar-practitioners from the United States who have been working together since 1998, inquiring into the impact of white supremacist consciousness. During our first year together, we used cooperative inquiry, a systematic process of action and reflection undertaken for the purpose of developing new knowledge and behaviors among the co-inquirers (Heron, 1996; Heron & Reason, 2001). We have continued our cooperative inquiry while also engaging in more traditional research activities.

Basing our understanding of first- and second-person action research on discussions by Reason and Torbert (2001) and Chandler and Torbert (2003), we perceive ourselves as engaged in second-person inquiry practice that we report in second-person inquiry voice. Since each member of a cooperative inquiry group also participates in ongoing personal inquiry into the group's topic, our individual and group experiences provide us with insights about interaction between first- and second-person inquiry practice.

Purpose

In this article, we reflect on what our experience reveals about the way second-person inquiry supports, deepens, and enhances first-person inquiry when the inquiry topic involves personal identity. Topics that challenge the core of personal identity can leave inquirers particularly vulnerable to self-delusion, avoidance or denial.

We begin by describing frames that affect our inquiry, followed by a brief description of our group. We then identify specific ways in which our group's second-person action research enhances our individual first-person inquiries. To bring those enhancing elements alive, we tell three stories from our experience.

Transforming meaning perspectives on whiteness

Our inquiry is about the impact of white supremacist consciousness on our lives. To aid the reader with understanding the context and outcomes of our inquiry, we explain white supremacist consciousness and how we link it to perspectives on race and racism. We also describe how transformative learning theory assists us in understanding the process of changing deeply held beliefs and why transformative outcomes are difficult to achieve.

White supremacist consciousness

Although the United States is often described as a nation of immigrants, its cultural norms are rooted tenaciously in the colonizing influences of Great Britain and other western European countries. Norms and practices associated historically with Western Europe dominate significant power structures, even as the country becomes increasingly multi-cultural and multi-racial. US scholars of color refer to the system of thought that supports the dominating norms as ‘white supremacist consciousness’ (Delgado, 1995). White Americans of European heritage both perpetuate and benefit from white supremacist consciousness.

The distinction between ‘white supremacist consciousness’ and ‘white supremacist’ is important. In the United States, ‘white supremacist’ refers to a person who advocates racial separatism based on the conviction that white people are superior human beings. In contrast, ‘white supremacist *consciousness*’ refers not to a person, but to a system of thought. This system of thought is a web of assumptions about the universal merits of norms and values that currently dominate American society. Because these values are normalized, their supremacy over other groups’ norms and values is implicit. That this consciousness is often invisible to those who hold it makes first-person inquiry on this subject particularly daunting. White supremacist consciousness hides in a profound *unconsciousness* about the impact of hegemony.

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 the term ‘white supremacist consciousness’ implies a focus on race, it is a system of thought that permeates all realms of 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 US-style democracy to other cultures (Paxton, 2002). These values and assumptions are vividly on display in the three stories we tell in this article; we are conscious about some of them and realize that many will be visible to others that we cannot see ourselves.

Because our group’s inquiry about white supremacist consciousness was initiated in response to concerns about race and racism, most of our inquiry cycles have been formulated in that context.

Perspectives on race and racism

General academic interest in race and racism in the US has stimulated the creation of several models that trace developmental stages of identity and racial awareness (Hardiman, 1994; Helms, 1984). We have found Ruth Frankenberg's (1993) framework particularly helpful in describing how race is perceived by white dominant society. Frankenberg describes three perspectives. In *essentialist racism*, races are perceived as unequal within systems of white superiority. White supremacists think and act within this perspective. The second perspective has two components of evasiveness. In *color evasiveness*, race-based differences are denied. Because the dominant culture assumes its own norms and values are universal, any departure from these norms is judged as deviant or incorrect. In *power evasiveness*, white people believe in equality but discount the impact of historical factors and structural inequity. Within a perspective of evasiveness, race is not perceived as salient. White supremacist consciousness is both color- and power-evasive. In Frankenberg's last perspective, *race cognizance*, race is recognized as salient. Race and associated cultural practices are perceived as different, but uniquely valuable. Members of our inquiry group aspire to integrate the perspective of race cognizance into our everyday lives.

Transformative learning theory

The premise of this article is that second-person inquiry significantly supports, deepens, and enhances first-person inquiry. When the topic involves an emotionally laden identity issue, the dynamic interaction between first- and second-person inquiry can be explained, in part, by transformative learning theory.

Adult learning theorist Jack Mezirow refers to a constellation of assumed beliefs and values, such as white supremacist consciousness, as a *meaning perspective* (1991) or *habit of mind* (2000). In making their case for a holistic theory of transformative learning, adult educators Lyle Yorks and Elizabeth Kasl extend Mezirow's conceptualization by adopting the descriptor, *habit of being* (Yorks & Kasl, 2002).

Transformative learning is a process of making visible perspectives and assumptions that have been invisible, recognizing distortions in our meaning perspectives so that we can create and internalize more appropriate ones. Because a web of epistemic, sociolinguistic, and psychological factors shapes meaning perspectives, they are exceedingly difficult to excavate and change (Mezirow, 1991, pp. 41–56, 118–144). 'When inadequate meaning schemes involve self-concept, we fill this void by compensation, projection, rationalization, or other forms of self-deception' (Mezirow, 1991, p. 44). Negotiating the pitfalls of self-deception is challenging. The implication, as Steven Taylor observes, is that '... first person research that aims to unearth deeply held frames is not easy to do on your own' (2004, p. 84). For Mezirow, reflective discourse is an essential part of transform-

ing deeply held meaning perspectives. Dialogue with others supports critical self-reflection on unexamined assumptions and frames of reference.

Beginning our group's inquiry

The conversation about white supremacist consciousness provides a backdrop for our group's story, which began in 1998 in the small predominantly white university with which we were each affiliated. In a moving end-of-semester presentation, students of color drew stark attention to how white supremacist consciousness affected their lives. In Frankenberg's terms, the students suggested that the institution was mired deeply in color and power evasiveness. They proposed a supportive course for students of color to explore the challenges of being scholars of color in a predominantly white institution. A number of white faculty and students responded by articulating institutional responsibility and pledging personal commitment to better understand racism, whiteness, and privilege. They proposed that white people form cooperative inquiry groups in order to learn about the impact of whiteness on their own and others' lives (European-American Collaborative Challenging Whiteness, 2002).

Our group formed as part of this initiative. In his personal journal after our first meeting, Daniel captured sentiments that many of us felt:

Membership in all-white groups has been a common occurrence throughout my life, but I can't remember a time when a group was consciously formed with that intention. The idea was . . . *not* reassuring to me.

I became more comfortable as we began to express why we were interested in this group. I didn't know these people, but found that they were comrades. It is affirming to know that others are committed to this work – to learning about what we do not know and exposing our weaknesses, even our ugliness. The image came to me that we were undressing ourselves. This exposure is not flattering.

Second-person inquiry supports, deepens, and enhances first-person inquiry

In the context of our inquiry into emotionally provocative identity issues, we have identified five first-person inquiry behaviors that are supported by participation in cooperative inquiry. Deepening capacity to engage in these behaviors enhances the integrity of insights achieved in the first-person inquiry. These behaviors are explained below and illustrated in the stories that follow.

Living in the inquiry is difficult when the inquiry challenges one's core sense of identity. Being accountable to a group not only heightens day-to-day awareness of the inquiry topic but also counteracts natural inclination to avoid or repress it.

Practicing new behaviors, recognizing when one fails to practice desired behavior, and unlearning habituated behaviors is a high-stakes enterprise. Cooperative inquiry group members help one another detect gaps between values and actions that may be invisible to the individual participant. The group also provides a safe place to practice new behaviors.

Reflecting-in-action (Schön, 1987) is a necessary skill when confronting situations that continually challenge identity. The first two actions – living in the inquiry and practicing new behaviors – create conditions in which inquirers can hone abilities to reflect-in-action.

Conceptualizing new learning about one's identity, when self-deception or partial understanding is likely, is enhanced by access to multiple perspectives. Inquiry groups that stay together over time also develop new language and metaphors that encode the complexity of their meaning-making.

Staying present to a range of emotional responses, including disorientation, vulnerability, anger and grief is difficult, particularly when self-concept is at stake. Inquiry groups provide support for facing emotional challenges and for legitimating emotional knowledge. Group members frequently offer perspectives not visible to the person immersed in emotion.

These five behaviors are interrelated and together contribute to the inquirer's ability to pursue with greater integrity topics that challenge self-concept.

In addition to identifying the five discrete behaviors, we have noticed a quality of being that seems essential to our inquiry about white supremacist consciousness. With a hunch that this habit of being may be relevant to other inquiries that put self-concept at risk, we tentatively suggest the importance of cultivating a meaning perspective that we call 'critical humility'. We define critical humility as the practice of being simultaneously committed and confident about our knowledge and action in the world, while remaining open to discovering that our knowledge is partial and evolving.

Applied to our inquiry, critical humility means that we strive on a daily basis to take confident actions that challenge racism and white hegemony. We also strive to remember that even as we challenge white supremacist consciousness, we are not immune to it. Remaining open to discovering the insidiousness of our *unconsciousness* is an ongoing challenge.

Critical humility and skillful practice of the five behaviors are mutually enhancing. An attitude of critical humility fosters skill in practicing the behaviors; ongoing skillful practice gradually transforms critical humility from fleeting insight into a habit of being.

Stories from our inquiry

Using pseudonyms, we now share stories intended to illustrate the five behaviors as well as our dance with the ambiguity and paradox of *critical humility*. Sharing Judi Marshall's concern that our 'confessional tales' not appear purposeless or self-indulgent (2004, p. 306), we accompany each story with interpretive commentary.

'Good white person'

At our first meeting we talked about why each of us was interested in an inquiry about whiteness. As we discussed our commitment to social justice efforts, it struck us that our efforts to be 'good' and do 'good work' led to a desire to distance ourselves from white people who either did not share our commitments or who did not know as much about race as we perceived ourselves to know. We began playfully to talk about 'good white people' and 'bad white people'. This conversation caught our imagination. We realized the potent irony: in trying to minimize our own supremacist consciousness, we felt compelled to cast ourselves as superior. We built our first action around this conversation: before our next meeting, we would each notice times when we felt like the 'good white person'.

Daniel's story: sudden revelation

Daniel's experience with this action became a critical learning event for our whole group. He told us about going to dinner with Josh, his life partner.

Josh had arranged for us to have dinner with a colleague from his company. I was exhausted and wanted to cancel but Josh explained that his colleague's wife would be joining us, and it would be nice if I were along as well. Feeling responsible to Josh, I agreed.

When we entered the noisy restaurant, we were directed to the table where Josh's colleague Farouk and his wife Jane were awaiting our arrival. Josh sat across from Farouk and I sat facing Jane. Josh and Farouk immediately began to talk about their work. I commented to Jane, 'We have probably lost them for the night'.

Jane was probably 10 years younger than me and looked eager to please. She asked how long Josh and I had been together and what kind of work I did. I mentioned school and she enthusiastically asked to 'hear all about it'. When I explained I was studying what it means to be white and how I wanted to work on my racism, she leaned over the table conspiratorially and told me she thought that was important. 'I have black friends', she confessed. 'When I was a girl my parents taught me to treat all people equally, no matter if they were black, white, green, or blue'. My eyes probably widened as I took in this information. I wondered to myself, 'How can she be so unconscious?' I realized I was stuck with someone I didn't know, who was

exhibiting the kind of ‘I-care-about-racism-aren’t-I-great’ perspective that I imagine is so offensive to people of color. Feeling smug, I would have rolled my eyes at Josh [who is bi-racial], but he was absorbed in conversation.

As I was caught in the frustration of how to proceed with the evening, our inquiry group’s action popped into my consciousness – ‘notice when you feel like the good white person’. Whew! That stopped me in my tracks. It was as though our group were sitting there on my shoulder, paying attention so that I could pay attention. My face got hot, my heart beat faster, and I took a breath that I promptly forgot to exhale. With a sense of the surreal, I experienced myself as floating above the restaurant, looking down at the two of us. It dawned on me, ‘I AM her. She cares about racism, is naïve about racism, and shows her ignorance when she speaks about racism. *I do all these things too!*’ I was, to my great surprise, overwhelmed with emotion. Tears welled up in my eyes, tears of recognition.

Daniel’s revelation, ‘I AM her’, demonstrates reflection-in-action. In the midst of feeling superior to Jane, Daniel feels the presence of the group’s inquiry and ‘stops in his tracks’. With his habituated behavior disrupted, he remembers the group’s conceptualization about the link between feeling superior and wanting to be a ‘good’ white person. The moment becomes Daniel’s conceptual epiphany. Daniel later observed that he doesn’t think his revelation would have occurred to him on his own.

As Daniel continues his story, he describes how his new realization changes his behavior, thus unfolding an unexpected response-in-action to someone who, moments earlier, he considered unworthy of his attention.

This surreal moment seemed to stretch out in slow motion for me, though it may have lasted only seconds. I was hit with waves of new insights. Fixed boundaries dissolved. I noticed interconnection with Jane instead of separation. I replaced judgment of her with compassion for her, and in doing so replaced judgment of myself with compassion for myself. I was humbled by my awareness of the arrogance and superiority with which I met Jane. My tears welled up as a result of this expanded awareness. I felt humbled, but not in a way that left me feeling ashamed or incompetent. Instead, my heart was full.

I imagine Jane noticed nothing different about my state of being, though I was now on another, unfamiliar planet. She kept talking and I started listening to her for the first time, as if I were sitting across from a cherished friend. When I began to really care about her – what she thought, and how we might have authentic communication – the rest of the night flew by.

Reflections on Daniel’s story

Second-person inquiry’s support of first-person research is implicated throughout Daniel’s story. First, Daniel stays in an inquiry mode, which he attributes to his participation in the cooperative inquiry. Daniel’s initial response to Jane’s state-

ment about treating ‘all people equally’ is judgmental. He suggests that it is unlikely his experience with Jane would have unfolded as it did had the group’s presence not suddenly ‘stopped me in my tracks’. In the end, Daniel saw himself in a new light: appreciative of and in relationship to the very person he had judged as inferior. He recently observed, ‘If it hadn’t been for the group’s action, my need to be superior would have overridden my ability to see myself in Jane’.

The story also demonstrates how conceptual knowledge is fluid within a group. Daniel’s experience and the insights it precipitated engaged the group in deepening the meaning that it attributed to the metaphor of ‘good white person’.

Six years after the incident, Daniel appreciates how important it was that he had a place to tell his story. ‘Without the group to witness my experience, I’m not sure I would have made as much meaning from it’.

‘You just get to thinking that you’re perfect, and then . . .’

We now recount Rose’s and Victoria’s experiences. Each woman describes an encounter in which she realizes her action did not match her self-image. In contrast to Daniel’s story, the interaction reported here happened recently, six years after we began our inquiry.

Victoria’s account of hearing Rose’s story

We tell Rose’s story from Victoria’s perspective because one focus of our attention is how Victoria was affected by hearing Rose, who describes an action the group had agreed members would carry out. In between meetings we would each interview people of color, asking them to describe circumstances when they feel most excluded or included. Additionally, we would ask for descriptions of our personal behaviors that seemed ‘especially white’. Victoria begins her account of hearing Rose:

Listening to Rose, I am aware of quivers in her voice as she begins to talk. Rose says:

‘I talked with a Latina woman whom I don’t know well. I had explained our group’s inquiry and what I wanted to ask her about. She talked about how her limited command of English often contributes to her feeling excluded. As an example, she described a problem she is having with preparing a *résumé* and job application’.

Rose pauses, and I notice how she seems to squirm before she continues: ‘So I say, “Oh, I could help you with that”. And because we live in different towns and I want to make it easy on her, I add, “I could come over to your house, sit at your computer and write it for you while you give me the information you want to include. We could have that done in no time.”’ Rose looks around the room at our small circle, pauses again, then says, ‘The woman looked at me and said, “That is so *gringa* of you”’.

We all gasp. Hearing our reaction, Rose smiles wistfully and adds, ‘She didn’t say it in a mean way. She knew I wanted to know about her perceptions of white people, and I had just unconsciously given her a perfect example’.

We are riveted by Rose’s story, five pairs of eyes asking what happened next. Rose seems to be re-entering the experience; she raises her hand and pats her chest, to show an increased heartbeat. Her breath becomes rapid. Swallowing hard, she continues, ‘For just a moment, I felt light headed with embarrassment and fear. My first impulse was to explain myself, to tell her that it was “in her interest” that I made the offer. But I thought, “Don’t get defensive – breathe – give her space and give yourself a chance to learn something”. I felt scared. My heart was beating and I had a lump in my throat, but I managed to say, “Tell me more about that”. And she did. “White people always want to do everything for you. I can do it myself and I *need* to do it myself”. She didn’t use the word “disempowering”, but that is what she meant’.

We all sigh with empathy, murmuring our recognition that Rose’s story could have been our own. We remember when we have tried to be ‘helpful’ in ways that were experienced by people of color as anything but helpful.

Rose continues, ‘Driving home, I was reflecting on what happened and trying to make meaning from it. I realized that although I try to stay in the inquiry, try to maintain my humility, I keep coming up against the fact that there is a part of me that isn’t humble. I think, “I’ve been working *hard* on these issues for a number of years and I have acquired some knowledge and wisdom!”’ Rose’s voice trails off, ‘You just get to thinking that you’re perfect, that you’ve “overcome” your white supremacist consciousness, and then . . .’

Before continuing with Victoria’s account of how she was affected by hearing Rose’s story, we comment on the story itself. It illustrates most of the ways that second-person inquiry provides significant support for first-person inquiry. First, Rose has stayed in the inquiry. Like the rest of us after six years, she continues to make our group’s inquiry a priority. Additionally, because of our work together Rose has internalized that it is important to remain in an inquiry mode when confronted by a disorienting event related to race, racism, or whiteness. With an instant capacity for reflection-in-action, Rose admonishes herself, ‘Don’t get defensive – breathe – give her space and give yourself a chance to learn something’. Because our group has practiced how to respond in difficult situations, Rose is able, even though she feels embarrassed and fearful, to find the inquiring response, ‘Tell me more about that’. Rose doesn’t fall prey to her impulse to justify herself, but shifts to inquiry mode and keeps herself, and the conversation, more open. She has avoided a habituated response and practiced a desired behavior.

Victoria's account of her own story: feeling like a sham

The way second-person inquiry assists first-person inquirers with emotional responses is illustrated as Victoria continues. She explains how Rose's account evoked an experience of her own that is such a painful challenge to her self image that she has avoided thinking about it.

Rose's words keep echoing for me, ' . . . thinking that you're perfect . . . and then . . .' I am moved to tell the group about my recent experience of realizing with dismay how far I am from being 'perfect'.

'Last spring', I tell them, 'I was meeting with a small group of dissertation advisees. The group of three women – two white and one African-American – has been meeting with me twice a month for about 18 months. The African-American student was describing her analysis of interview data from her case study of an African-American group whose purpose is to help its members heal from internalized racism. She was bubbling over with emerging confidence that she really could 'do this dissertation thing'. Excited and smiling, she observed, 'One thing I think is interesting is that I realized I hadn't made any coding categories about white people. My interviewees talked about white people, but I hadn't thought about coding that'. At this point, I become very interested in the fact that she has an emergent coding category. I start asking her what the data tell her and why she thinks she hadn't thought about an analytic category related to white people. Thinking I am being helpful, I suggest that she write up a preliminary analysis of this theme.

I pause. I feel shame washing over me. Knowing it is now too late to keep my story under wraps, I look at my colleagues, then stare into some middle distance as I confide, 'This is really hard. I haven't told anyone about this. I've been trying very hard not to tell myself'. Breathing shallowly with nervous discomfort, I continue, 'Two weeks later, the group comes together and when it is [this student's] turn, she sits silent for a moment. Then she says, "I didn't do the assignment Victoria asked me to do". I am puzzled, which I probably communicate by leaning forward slightly, raising my eyebrows. She plunges on. Formed like a question but stated as a wailed exclamation, "Why does it *always* have to be about white people!" Having spat out that statement, she continues softly, "This is *my* dissertation and I want it to be about *us!*"'

Hearing the same gasp of recognition and empathy from my co-inquirers that they expressed when Rose told her story, I am silent. Someone says, 'What happened next?' I explain that I remember being aware that I shouldn't try to 'make it ok' by justifying why I focused on the emergent coding category. Instead, I mumbled an apology and quickly shifted the topic by asking the student what her preference was for a next step.

One of my colleagues observes, 'You are clearly emotional about this story. Why is it so charged for you?' To me, the answer is obvious, but I realize my colleague's inquiry is genuine. Close to tears as I re-experience last spring's anguished shame, I answer, 'I have worked so hard to help this student develop confidence as a

researcher and to make it ok that I am a white woman chairing her dissertation. And what do I do? I trample all over it. I just babbled on and lapsed into what I do when I get interested in an idea – I start talking about the idea and stop talking with the person’. One of my colleagues adds, ‘And to make matters worse, it was about whiteness. I don’t think you would be feeling so badly if the topic had been anything else’. I inhale sharply and nod my agreement.

Someone asks, ‘When did you say this happened, Victoria?’ and I answer, ‘I think it was last April’. This lapse of time is revealing. Our group has met at least four times since April. Our norm is to allocate part of each meeting for members to share important experiences. Usually, I am eagerly waiting to share whatever has come up in my life that relates to our inquiry topic. Yet I have not, until stimulated today by Rose’s story, told our group about this encounter.

I see myself as someone who has earned trust and respect from African-American students because of my efforts to be an ‘aware’ white person – that is, I now realize, a ‘good white person’. This experience felt devastating to my self-concept and makes me feel like a sham.

Reflections on Victoria’s story

Victoria’s story is more complex than the first two, in that its significance unfolds over three different moments in time. When her student exclaims, ‘Why does it always have to be about white people’, Victoria understands in an intuitive flash that she had failed two weeks earlier to act from two of our group’s hard-earned insights – the need to stay conscious of power relationships when interacting with people of color and the arrogance of re-centering whiteness. Although she managed a brief apology and avoided trying to justify her earlier behavior, Victoria felt such shame about the incident that she didn’t tell her inquiry group about the experience and tried hard not to think about it herself. Having shut down, she cannot learn from the experience. Only when Rose makes herself vulnerable by sharing something similar is Victoria able to voice her own story. By doing so, she makes it available as a learning opportunity, both for the group and for herself. She reports, ‘After I told my story to the group, I was able to let go of the shame. Not that I think what I did was ok, but I am able now to think about it, learn from it, and move on’.

Victoria’s experience represents an assault on the identity she has carefully cultivated over years of attention to how she can be more sensitive to the racial dynamics between herself and her students. Victoria’s self-perception that she pays attention to white supremacist consciousness is credible; her reputation has drawn students of color to her. This sense of herself is so important to Victoria that when she stumbles, as she did in this encounter, she has trouble facing it. Participation in a second-person inquiry group supports her in disrupting avoidance behavior. Hearing Rose’s story in the safety of the group gives Victoria

courage. She is ready to examine her experience so that she can re-engage her commitment to live in a first-person inquiry about whiteness.

In tentative conclusion . . .

To varying degrees, all members of our group see themselves as adult educators. We think about action research as a process for learning, by individuals and groups. In the space available here, we can do little more than attest to how our understanding of the dialogue about *research/practice* and *transformational action research* (Reason & Torbert, 2001) is enriched by our grounding in theories about how people learn from experience (Mezirow, 1991, 2000; Yorks & Kasl, 2002).

We believe that second-person inquiry significantly supports, deepens, and enhances first-person inquiry when core identity is at stake. We recognize that critically self-reflective first-person inquirers have other strategies available to them for negotiating the shoals of such an inquiry. One strategy often employed is seeking feedback from others in order to discover unexamined assumptions. According to transformative learning theory, reflective discourse is a key to transforming 'taken-for-granted frames of reference . . . to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, self reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action' (Mezirow, 2000, pp. 7–8).

In spite of our healthy respect for the benefit of any encounter that enables reflective discourse, we argue that second-person inquiry of the type described here provides unique support for first-person inquiry. We identify three characteristics of cooperative inquiry groups that make them different from other types of feedback or dialogue groups.

First, cooperative inquiries produce a rich store of shared language and concepts so that complex experiences can be explored in greater depth within limited time frames. Second, the mutuality of the inquiry is significant. When members of a cooperative inquiry provide a co-inquirer with feedback, they have mutual investment in the meaning making. Finally, effective groups develop competency in providing both caring support and compassionate challenge. Though other kinds of groups and dyads can create safe spaces, cooperative inquiry groups practice specific procedures that mitigate the potential for groupthink and minimize self-fulfilling prophecies.

Interrelationship among the five behaviors illustrated by the stories

We have identified five behaviors that we think are instrumental for transforming consciousness when identity is at stake. They are: living in the inquiry; practicing new behaviors and unlearning habituated behaviours; reflecting-in-action; conceptualizing new learning; and staying open to a full range of emotional responses. Although we have described the behaviors as if they were distinct, as lived experience they are interconnected. These behaviors interact in mutual enhancement with critical humility. We summarize the interconnections in each story:

Daniel's grasp of the 'good white person' concept provides the impetus for his sudden realization that he is like Jane. His habituated need to feel superior to people like Jane – which he might have expressed by rolling his eyes at his biracial partner – is interrupted by reflection-in-action. When he sees himself acting as the 'good white person', Daniel is able to substitute a new and more relational behavior. Not only is Daniel affected emotionally when he is interacting with Jane, but when he later tells his story to the inquiry group, his learning is enhanced because of the emotional support that he describes as 'being witnessed'. When Daniel realizes 'I AM her' he interrupts his habit of judging others as inferior so that he can feel good about himself. As Daniel and Jane continue to speak, Daniel can share what he does know with Jane and be simultaneously open to what he doesn't know. Daniel's capacity to hold this paradox represents critical humility.

Rose's sense of who she is as a white person is that she has 'acquired some knowledge and wisdom' about white supremacist consciousness, much of it derived from six years of inquiry with our group. Her belief about herself is at odds with being told she is acting 'so *gringa*'. Rose's habituated response would have been defensive self-justification. Instead, she approaches a state of critical humility. She is committed to helping others and to interacting with people of color from a store of wisdom, but recognizes she doesn't know what help looks like to the woman of color she wants to help.

In her second interchange with her African-American student, Victoria realizes she had not applied concepts learned from the group's inquiry: foreground the relationship, remain aware of the power differential, and avoid re-centering conversation onto whiteness. When she realizes what she has done, Victoria becomes so ashamed that she closes down and practices none of the five inquiry behaviors. Through Rose's example, Victoria is able to allow the repressed emotion to surface and the group is able to help her interrupt the shame so that she can continue in a learning mode. By acknowledging and naming her misstep, Victoria is able to re-enter the perspective of critical humility, which requires compassionate acceptance of self as not knowing. She then can move forward with renewed commitment and confidence in what she does know – that she is an able and supportive dissertation chair for people of color.

Emotion as a catalyst for learning and transformation

Although we describe five interrelated behaviors that account for how second-person inquiry enhances the quality of first-person inquiry findings when identity is at stake, we single out emotion for special attention. Emotion can block authentic meaning making or catalyze meaningful new learning. It signals that something important is happening to which we should pay special attention. Daniel is ‘overwhelmed with emotion’ and moved to ‘tears of recognition’ when he experiences a sudden revelation that he is Jane. Rose is embarrassed and fearful at being caught out as ‘so *gringa*’, but is able to move past the response in order to reflect-in-action. In contrast, Victoria succumbs to shame and avoids thinking about an experience from which she needs to learn.

In each case, core identity is at stake. The role of the group in Victoria’s case is obvious. Hearing another member’s story pries loose the emotional block that has kept Victoria stuck in an unproductive state of shame. In the safe space of the group, she is assisted in learning from her experience and moving on. In Daniel’s and Rose’s cases, each had internalized the group’s conceptual knowledge so that it was palpably available during an emotional moment. In all three cases, the act of telling the story to the group is a catalyst for learning.

Quality

We identified five quality-enhancing behaviors as well as the habit of being we call critical humility by reflecting on how our individual first-person inquiries are supported by our group’s inquiry. We now ask, ‘How do these quality-enhancing factors relate to the dimensions of quality identified by Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury (2001)?’

Reason and Bradbury’s discussion of quality (2001, pp. 11–12) guides the action researcher in asking questions that will excavate the research’s emergent character and enduring consequence by asking concrete questions about significance, relational practice, use of plural ways of knowing, and outcomes. Reason (in press) has recently reconfigured these clusters into four dimensions that he argues present a broad range of quality criteria that extend beyond those employed in traditional empirical research. The four dimensions are: worthwhile practical purposes; democracy and participation; many ways of knowing; and emergent developmental form.

In trying to cast our examination of quality in terms of the Reason and Bradbury discussion, we feel a bit like wanderers in a forest who are examining individual trees, while our mentors pass overhead to view the entire terrain. We are aware that we inhabit the terrain, but its general contours have not commanded our attention. When we scan the larger terrain, we feel at home. Our research purpose seems worthwhile and practical – learning, as white people in

the United States, to confront and change our capacities for action so that we can move toward embodying race cognizance as an epistemological position. Because we are learning from our experience of encountering our white *unconsciousness* in our day-to-day living, our research's emergent form seems self-evident. Cooperative inquiry, which is the support structure we employ, is the essence of democracy and participation.

The focus of our analysis has not been on the intrinsic merits of our project or justification for its methodology. Rather, we have explored how we can enhance the likelihood that we will enjoy relative success with our intentions. In terms of the quality criteria advanced by Reason and Bradbury, our analysis relates most explicitly to the many ways of knowing that enable first-person inquirers to live in an inquiry that threatens their most cherished beliefs about themselves. With support of the group, inquirers remain open to emotions and are assisted in avoiding self-justification and denial. Especially important for inquiry that threatens self-concept is support for the discomfort of not knowing. Inquirers engage each other through stories that bring alive each inquirer's felt experience so that all can learn while staying grounded in the world of practice. The group provides witness to new learning, thus reinforcing it. Group members make conceptual meaning together and practice new behaviors so that ultimately, they can learn new habits of being that are more inclusive, discerning, and open to change. Thus, the group provides an important context for the first-person inquirer to develop lasting capacities.

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