

Developing Critical Humility: A Dialogic Practice for White People
May 31, 2007 10-12 AM

The following is a transcript and description of the workshop presented at 20th Annual National Conference on Race and Ethnicity (NCORE) in San Francisco, May 30-June 2, 2007.

Welcome to the Workshop:

My name is Alec MacLeod and this is my colleague Elizabeth Kasl. We are members of a six person inquiry group called the European-American Collaborative Challenging Whiteness. For the last 8 years our group has been engaging in research on the experience of whiteness in the context of US society. We initially came together in 1998 to develop our understanding about what it means to be a member of the dominant group in society and to translate our growing understanding and expanded awareness into new behavior and action for social change.

One of the reasons that we think working together as a group of white people is valuable is our strong belief that as a matter of social justice, white people have a responsibility to develop our awareness without absorbing time when we occupy public spaces with people of color.

We do not think that working together as a group of white people can be effective in a vacuum. Our work together focuses on critically examining our actions in the world and the underlying assumptions that forge those actions. All of us are active in multi-cultural and multi-racial groups; we bring that life experience into our group as the context for our mutual reflection.

We see learning about being white, and working to address racism in ourselves, as an ongoing practice and not an end we achieve.

I would like to begin by noting the obvious: this is a workshop addressing issues of race presented by two people who are visibly white. Were I attending this workshop today rather than leading it, I confess I would enter both hopeful and skeptical. I would be hopeful because, as I have said, I believe it is critical that white people take initiative on matters of race. I would be skeptical because, in my experience, as white people we often live lives in which the experiences of prejudice and oppression, especially institutional oppression, are rendered invisible. However well intentioned Elizabeth and I may be, we run the risk of exposing our limits and ignorance in both the content and process of our presentation.

Our workshop this morning is about developing the practice we call critical humility. You will learn that the purpose of practicing critical humility is in part to assist in the very kind of situation you may find yourself in this morning—thinking that you want to talk to another white person about their well intentioned ignorance. If, in the end, you find yourself feeling it is vital that you share with us some concern you may have about our presentation, you might decide try on the practice of critical humility. Or an opportunity may arise at some other point in the conference.

The specific circumstance of sharing with us the error of our ways might be a part of a larger category: conversations among white people about race. First, race is not typically a topic of discussion among white people. In his presentation yesterday on teaching White Privilege in a predominantly white institution, Bob Amico stated bluntly that many of his white undergraduates had never in their lives had a conversation about the subject. Apparently the three traditionally taboo subjects—sex politics and religion—are easy compared to race. Further, it is our perception that often when white people do consider the subject of race, they emphasize cross-racial communication. This focus leaves largely unexamined issues of how white people talk among themselves about race, racism, white supremacist consciousness, and white privilege. The goal of the practice of critical humility is to become more aware, as a white person, of those personal behaviors that not only impede dialogue but also may perpetuate the very phenomenon that as well intentioned white people, we wish to challenge.

In our inquiry group, one of our early realizations was we desire to be and to be perceived as “good white people.” Our research suggests that this is a common phenomenon. And this desire is one of the most pernicious and persistent behaviors that closes off conversation. My *desire* to become a good white person might—at times—assist me in speaking up or intervening when I see oppressive behavior or systems. At other times, if I believe that I AM a good white person I am also likely to mistakenly believe I already have all the answers and close myself off to new learning. By claiming a superior position, I too often blind myself to the ways in which I am like those to whom I feel superior and blind myself to the ways in which I continue to benefit from white privilege.

The practice of Critical Humility is one of reminding ourselves that our knowledge is partial and evolving while at the same time committing to our knowledge and to action in the world based on that knowledge. Critical humility is a practice of reflecting—either prospectively or retrospectively—on our actions in conversations with other white people. We specifically focus on issues of identity, such as the “good white person,” and their impact on our behavior, because we believe that our investments in such identities can be hard to overcome. The practices themselves may be familiar to many of you, though the context may be new.

The workshop centers on simultaneous role play in which all of you will participate. The role play will form a basis of shared experience for our process of reflection. In these role plays all participants are asked to take on the persona of a white person, regardless of your actual race. In a few moments Elizabeth will describe further what is involved. After the role play, we will take some time in small groups and in the full group to try on an abbreviated version of critical humility and see what insights and options emerge.

At this time, I will place a sign on the door closing participation so that we will not be interrupted by latecomers. Because of the structure of the workshop we are asking you for your participation. I really understand that at a conference like this you may wish to at least check out more than one presentation in any time slot. And,

if you leave in the middle, it will likely affect the experience of other people in your small group. After Elizabeth describes the role play if you feel that you cannot give it a try at least through the role play itself and one round of reflection, we ask that you leave before we get started.

Instructions for simultaneous role-play:

We are going to use simultaneous role-play in order to create an experience that we will all have in common. We can then use the common experience as the basis for further discussion about the concept of critical humility.

What do we mean by simultaneous role-play? We divide into small groups in order to play out an imagined situation described in these written instructions (hold them up). Each small group has the same instructions and plays out the same situation at the same time. In other words, there is no audience, just small groups doing the role-play simultaneously. When we finish, everyone in the room will have an experience in common.

I first learned about simultaneous role-play years ago, when I was taking a graduate course in organizational development. I have used it over the years because I think it has important advantages over the more traditional approach, where one group plays the situation and everyone else watches. First, everyone gets involved and therefore everyone has a chance to connect to the situation emotionally, which greatly enhances learning. The second advantage is that, since there is no audience, it reduces performance anxiety.

The way this role-play works is as follows. The written instructions have two different sections. One section is a short script that lays out the beginning of a conversation among three friends, all of whom are white. Everyone in the room will have the identical script. The second part of the instructions gives specific information about one of the characters in the role-play. This information tells something about that character's beliefs and values. Only the person playing the role will know what the instructions say about the individual character.

We all know that one of the biggest challenges with role-plays is that participants sometimes act like themselves, instead of taking on the beliefs and values of the character they are supposed to be playing. To assist you with getting inside the perspective of your character's beliefs and values, we will begin this activity by having all the people who are playing the same role talk together. You will imagine together what your character is feeling and thinking and what kinds of arguments your character is likely to make as you continue the conversation that begins in the role-play script.

It is important to remember that everyone included in this situation is white. Each of the characters has a set of beliefs and values that, in our group's experience, are common among white people who care about racial equality and social justice.

The names of the characters are Chris, Casey, Alex, and Drew. Some groups will have a fifth character named Bailey.

To summarize the instructions:

We will begin with small groups of people talking to each other about their characters. Thus, we'll have one group where everyone is playing the role of Chris, another group of Caseys, another of Alexes and so on.

It is important that you try to step into your character's beliefs and values. Some of you will have more difficulty than others, trying to imagine how your character thinks and feels. This is why your conversation in these "character groups" is so important.

After you have had ten or fifteen minutes to become your character, we will then regroup in order to play out the actual conversation. You will see that your script has a number on it. When it is time to do the actual role-play, you will join the other characters who have the same number on their script. That is, the Chris who has number 1 will join the Casey, Alex, and Drew who also have number 1. And so forth.

Once you are in your role-play groups, you will begin your conversation by reading the script and then, doing your best to stay in character, you will continue the conversation for about fifteen minutes.

We will then stop the role-play and debrief the experience, first in your small groups and then with every one.

Participants were divided into four groups, one for each character. Those who had the same character gathered to develop an understanding of the character in preparation for doing the role play. Each participant received a sheet with his/her role described as below:

Chris In this role you believe that the situation in New Orleans is not really an issue of race, but one of class. You take the position that poverty is colorblind and that to make this a discussion of race would be to notice something that is not relevant. You were taught to treat everyone the same, regardless of skin color. It really wouldn't matter to you if the people in the 9th ward were pink, blue or polka-dotted. You feel it is important to share this insight with your friends.

Casey In this role you are deeply aware of your privilege in American society. You were taught from an early age that with privilege come obligations to those less fortunate than yourself. You perceive that the Katrina aftermath has the potential to be an intervention in the cycles of poverty in New Orleans. The situation offers the prospect of breaking these patterns, lifting up underprivileged Blacks and opening up the opportunity of being a part of mainstream American life. You feel it is important to share this insight with your friends.

Alex In this role you feel that a good ally in race relations should support the African American community. In the past you have felt a great deal of guilt and shame about the privilege accorded to skin color and have recently made a commitment to name racism whenever you recognize it. You have been distressed to see the Black face of poverty in New Orleans and feel strongly that this injustice should be addressed. You

are also distressed at the apparent lack of sophistication of your friends and feel it is vital to share your knowledge with them.

Drew Your primary role is to listen and observe. You may have opinions about what is being said and may be offended by or supportive of any or all of the positions taken or have an entirely different perspective altogether. If this is the case you must decide whether and how to share your perspective with these three or four strangers.

Bailey Your primary role is to listen and observe. You may have opinions about what is being said and may be offended by or supportive of any or all of the positions taken or have an entirely different perspective altogether. If this is the case you must decide whether and how to share your perspective with these three or four strangers.

Participants regrouped into role-play groups, indicated by a number on their script and character description and do the role play:

Script

Three white friends, Chris, Casey and Alex, have decided to meet one morning at a crowded café for coffee and conversation shortly after Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans. A fourth person, Drew, is writing in his/her journal at a table with three empty seats. The three friends ask if they can sit at the table and Drew agrees to share it with them. In some groups there may be fifth person, Bailey, also at the table, also writing in his/her journal. Each person is White and considers her/himself to be non-racist.

Chris: Isn't the devastation terrible, especially in the 9th ward! People lost everything. It makes me so mad that it's always the case that the poorest areas get hit the hardest!

Casey: Yes, it's awful ... But you know, even though I'm really sorry that people lost their homes, maybe it's a good thing in the end. After all, these were poor Black neighborhoods. Young people were caught up in a cycle of poverty and crime without much of a chance of breaking out; schools were marginal at best. This way they can start out fresh. They can have a chance to go to better schools where they have been re-located and have more exposure to attitudes and values that lead to success.

Alex: Yikes! How can you say that? ... If you think about what you just said, it's really racist. We White people have to be more understanding of the struggle African-Americans have in this country. We have to acknowledge the legacy of slavery, and support Black people in their struggle. I mean, what would you do to make the situation different? Political action is imperative. I want to find out what the community needs and support that in any way I can.

Drew: *listens*

[**Bailey:** *listens*]

Role-play was debriefed in Role-play Groups:

Guiding questions:

- Did you feel understood?
- Did you feel respected?
 - If not, in what ways did you feel misperceived?
 - If yes, what contributed to this sense?

Critical Humility Reflection:

For the workshop the role play groups further debriefed using an abbreviated description of the Critical Humility questions, emphasizing issues of identity:

What were all of the self-identities that might be in operation and at risk in this situation (e.g., “good” person, anti-racist, activist, educator, etc.)? It can be surprising to see the variety of identities operating in a given situation. One way to help uncover the specific self-identity at risk is to ask questions like:

- Where did my character feel threatened?
- What was my character scared about?
- What attracted my character in this situation, or how did my character see myself as different from others in this situation?
- What was the identity label my character sought to avoid?
- What was the phenomenon my character wished to change?

Was my character’s purpose and strategy for participating in this communication in alignment with my self-identity?

How was my character similar to that which I was criticizing or seeking to change?

To what extent did I and/or my character disclose (am I disclosing) myself and thus, let myself be vulnerable to new learning?

Participants were asked to generate options for the characters based on model. We closed with a full group discussion of the model and questions.

The following was handed out as a take-home description of Critical Humility:

Critical Humility: The Paradox of Knowing and Not Knowing:

Critical humility is a dialogic practice that can guide white people in becoming more effective in their conversations about race, racism, white privilege, and hegemony. Guiding questions assist learners in reflecting critically about issues that affect the practice of critical humility. These questions focus on self-identity, privilege, purpose of actions, and quality of self-reflection.

In the context of our inquiry, we have identified a quality of being that we call *critical humility*. It is our perception that when white people consider the subject of

race, they often focus on the racial other, leaving how white people talk among themselves largely unexamined. The goal practicing critical humility is to become more aware, as a white person, of those personal behaviors that not only impede dialogue but also may perpetuate the very phenomenon that we wish to challenge.

In our inquiry group, we discovered that our desire to be, and to be perceived as, a “good white person” catalyzes pernicious and persistent behaviors that close off conversation. Desire to be a good white person may encourage a white person to speak up about oppressive behavior or systems, but it can also lead to a false confidence about having “done my work,” that is, perceiving oneself as the expert about how to be a good white ally.

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 a paradox. If we are to hold ourselves accountable for acting, we must have confidence that our knowledge is valid enough to shape actions that are appropriate. At the same time, knowing that our knowledge is distorted by hegemony and possible self-deception, we need to be on constant alert about limits to the validity of our knowing.

The Critical Humility Model of Prospective or Retrospective Reflection:

We have designed questions designed to focus attention on issues that we have found most often affect critical humility – self-identity and values, the role of privilege, the purpose of the inquiry, and the self-reflective process. When using these guiding questions for our own inquiries, we have found that critically self-reflective answers can be remarkably difficult without the support of others. These guidelines are useful both for examining one’s own beliefs and practices as well as for engaging others in examining theirs.

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 etc.)
- 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?
 - Spend time unpacking a particular self-identity. What does one with this identity do? How would we know one when we see one?
 - What are the costs and benefits of changing self-identity? How are these costs related to feelings of self-worth?
 - How does the situation relate to my core values and beliefs about myself? How much stake do I have in the values being questioned? How do I see the “moral high ground” in this situation?
 - Are there competing or contradicting values or identities involved?

II. *Role of Privilege:*

The impact of identity relates to the context of the situation. For example, the lone white man in a group of women and people of color might feel like a minority, but the group's presence within a predominantly white organization would reinforce white and male privilege, even if the man is the only white male in the group.

- What is the privilege operating in the situation? Is privilege based on race, class, religion, gender ethnicity, age, physical ability or sexual orientation operating?
- Acknowledging that we all have multiple identities, which ones become salient and operate at any given time? What privilege do I have in this situation?
- In what ways am I resisting perceiving myself in a dominant position?
- Is the context indifferent to my identity? Does the context 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 the self-identity(ies) at stake?
- How might I be perpetuating the phenomenon I wish to change in this situation?

IV. *Self-Reflective Process:*

The entire set of guidelines engages the learner in a self-reflective practice. These questions can be helpful if a learner is stuck or confused about the first three sets of questions. In our experience, feeling lost or confused is to be expected as a 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?