



Transformative Learning in Practice

*Insights from Community, Workplace,
and Higher Education*

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Challenging Racism in Self and Others

Transformative Learning as a Living Practice

European-American Collaborative Challenging Whiteness

In this chapter, we describe a form of action research that is well suited to fostering transformative learning when self-identity is at stake. We refer to this practice as CI, an abbreviation that designates either cooperative or collaborative inquiry. Cooperative inquiry is an action research methodology developed over the past forty years by human potential theorist John Heron (1996). *Collaborative inquiry* is the nomenclature adopted by adult educators who advocate this action research process as a liberatory structure for adult learning (Bray, Lee, Smith, & Yorks, 2000; Yorks & Kasl, 2002; Chapter Twenty-Two, this volume).

We present a case example drawn from our personal experience as a group of white adult educators who have used CI to change our awareness about privilege, race, and racism. Because white people's awareness about our relationship to race is one expression of a meaning perspective that is profoundly intractable and difficult to transform, our case example is ideal for illustrating CI as a transformative practice in action. Before proceeding to the case description, we describe the intractable meaning perspective that engenders white people's perceptions about privilege, race, and racism.

WHITE SUPREMACIST CONSCIOUSNESS AS A MEANING PERSPECTIVE

White people's meaning perspective on race is rooted in a system of thought known as "white supremacist consciousness" (Delgado, 1995). Although the United States is increasingly multicultural and multiracial, cultural norms that dominate significant power structures continue to reflect the original colonizing powers of Great Britain and other Western European countries. Some U.S. scholars of color and white allies refer to this dominating system as white supremacist consciousness.

Although some people conflate the label "white supremacist consciousness" with "white supremacist," these phrases do not have the same meaning. In the United States, "white supremacist" refers to a person who believes that white people are superior human beings. In contrast, "white supremacist consciousness" refers not to a person but to a system of thought. Spelman College president Beverly Daniel Tatum (2000) explains how individual beliefs differ from systemic power when, writing about racism, she observes, "Many white people think of racism as a problem of individual prejudice and hatred," while many people of color understand racism as "an intricate web of individual attitudes, cultural messages and institutional practices that systematically advantage whites and disadvantage people of color" (p. 11).

In the United States, this web of attitudes, cultural messages, and institutional practices has become normalized, thus creating an implicit inference that the dominating culture's norms are superior to others' values and practices. Although the term "white supremacist consciousness" derives from the context of discourse about race, this consciousness permeates multiple realms of behavior and attitudes (Ani, 1994). White ways of being, such as dualism, individualism, or presumption that one's values are universal, manifest throughout U.S. society (Paxton, 2003). That this consciousness is often invisible to those who hold it strengthens it as a force for hegemony.

Looking at how white people in the United States perceive race, Ruth Frankenberg (1993) identifies three major perspectives. In *essentialist racism*, races are perceived as unequal within systems of white superiority. Individuals known as white supremacists think and act from this perspective. A second perspective encompasses two types of evasiveness. *Color evasiveness* denies race-based differences, and *power evasiveness* discounts the impact of historical factors and structural inequities. People who frame their worldview by evading the salience of race and power are purveyors of white supremacist consciousness, though, by definition, they are unaware of their complicity.

Within Frankenberg's third perspective, *race cognizance*, people consciously reject both white supremacy and white supremacist consciousness while engaging actively in efforts to decenter whiteness. Nevertheless, their actions often betray their conscious good intentions because limitations in their knowledge, imposed by the tenacious grip of white supremacist consciousness, remain invisible to them.

Each of these positions—essentialist racism, color or power evasiveness, and race cognizance—can be thought of as what adult learning theorist Jack Mezirow calls a meaning perspective (1991) or habit of mind (Mezirow & Associates, 2000). According to Mezirow, transformative learning is a process of making visible perspectives that have been invisible and coming to recognize the distortions and limitations in current meaning perspectives so that one is able to create and integrate more appropriate ones. The challenge of making whiteness and white supremacist consciousness visible to white people so that we can change our habits of mind is an ideal location and subject for transformative learning practice.

CI AS A PRACTICE THAT FOSTERS TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

In the CI process, described more fully in Chapter Twenty-Two (this volume), a small group of peers seeks to learn from personal experience about an issue that each group member finds compelling. In this chapter, we use our case example to focus on three of CI's important practices: repeated cycles of action and reflection, extended epistemology rooted in personal experience, and group learning.

Repeated cycles of action and reflection are designed by the group to yield information about what the group is studying. Actions can be carried out by the group as a whole or by individual members in the context of daily living. In either case, the cycle is completed through group reflection on the meaning of the actions and their perceived results.

The group's meaning making is grounded in an extended epistemology, which presupposes that meaningful knowledge is rooted in the knowledge makers' lived experience. For example, in this chapter's illustrative case, group members do not study white supremacist consciousness in others or white supremacist consciousness in U.S. society, but instead, white supremacist consciousness in ourselves. Furthermore, as with all other types of action research, the primary purpose of developing new knowledge is for taking action. In our case example, we describe how we use our deepening understanding of white supremacist consciousness to change personal behavior so that action in our professional and personal lives is more effective.

Heron (1996) describes CI epistemology as "extended" because it values four interconnected ways of knowing: experiential, presentational, propositional, and practical. Current educational practice heavily favors two ways of knowing, propositional and practical (Boud, Cohen, & Walker, 1993; Paxton, 2003). In contrast, CI's extended epistemology honors the equal importance of experiential and presentational knowing, which some adult educators identify as pivotal forces for personal transformation because these ways of knowing are the sites of emotions, intuition, and imagination (Yorks & Kasl, 2006; Paxton, 2003).

The context of group learning fosters individual learning by supporting several skills and behaviors: living in the inquiry, recognizing disjuncture between espoused beliefs and actual practice, practicing new behaviors, improving the ability to reflect in action, conceptualizing new ideas, and staying present to learning in the face of difficult emotional challenges (European-American Collaborative Challenging Whiteness, 2005a). In addition to creating a context that supports individual learning, groups learn as whole systems. They create complex knowledge that becomes a foundation for action and continued meaning making. The group often encodes this knowledge in key phrases or metaphor (Kasl & Marsick, 1997).

Although each of the practices just described (action and reflection, extended epistemology, group learning) is commonly found in adult education (Taylor, 2007), it is their synergistic interaction in the CI process that fuels their power for transformative learning and change. The following case example drawn from our personal experience shows this synergism at work.

TRANSFORMING OUR CONSCIOUSNESS ABOUT WHITENESS AND TAKING ACTION

We are a group of six white adult educators who, as individuals, practice in different institutional and community settings. Meeting monthly since 1998, we use CI practices to inquire into the impact of white supremacist consciousness. In the following case example, we show our personal and collective transformation with three snapshots, taken in 1998, 2002, and 2005. Our intention is to illustrate how CI looks and feels in practice.

1998: Seeing the "Good White Person" as a Friend and Enemy Within

At our first meeting, we discussed our individual interests in an inquiry about whiteness and our commitments to social justice. It struck us that our efforts to "be good" and "do good work" led us to distance ourselves from white

people who seemed to us not to share our commitments or not to 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 supremacist consciousness, we felt compelled to cast ourselves as superior (which is supremacist consciousness). We created our first CI action in order to explore the idea further: before our next meeting, we would each notice when we felt like the “good white person” and record our thoughts and feelings.

At our next meeting, Daniel told us about his experience in a social situation with Jane, a woman he had just met:

She asked . . . 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. . . . When I was a girl my parents taught me to treat all people equally, no matter if they were black, white, green, or blue” [European-American Collaborative Challenging Whiteness, 2005a, p. 251].

Daniel looked around the room at each of us, shaking his head with self-deprecation as he reexperienced his dinner with Jane. He told us how smug he had felt, thinking he knew more about racism than Jane did because he imagined the phrase she used was self-congratulatory and offensive to people of color. He was afraid he was “stuck” having dinner with someone who thought she knew it all. Then, in a voice of wonderment, he described a moment of epiphany:

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. . . . 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 naive about racism, and shows her ignorance when she speaks about racism. *I do all these things too!*” I was . . . overwhelmed with . . . tears of recognition. . . .

The surreal moment seemed to stretch out in slow motion. . . . I was hit with waves of new insights. . . . 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 [European-American Collaborative Challenging Whiteness, 2005a, p. 252].

Hearing Daniel’s story solidified our interest in exploring the concept “good white person.” Over the year, we gradually created a profile of the good white

person's motivations and behaviors, enhancing our knowledge through additional actions such as "put yourself in a situation where your whiteness is very visible." Our evolving views of the good white person became a critical signifier for our meaning making.

2002: Learning More About Ourselves as White People

We continued to change our awareness and ability to act from that awareness with ongoing cycles of action and reflection. We also interviewed others who were using CI to learn about their whiteness (Barlas et al., 2000), wrote empirical papers, and designed participatory workshops. Because our experience piqued our curiosity about how to elicit reflections rich with detail and insight, we decided to try for ourselves a data collection strategy one of our members learned from a former colleague.

The life history methodology created by Matthias Finger (1986) helps people discern patterns. The first step is to choose categories for describing important influences on one's life. We chose people, places, historical events, critical personal incidents, and "other." The second step is to create material that can be used to make a visual representation of these influences. The process involves assigning each category of influence to a different color, then writing individual entries on separate colored sticky notes. For example, one might end up with a group of twenty pink stickies, each with the name of one person who had been an important influence; a group of twelve green stickies, each with a meaningful historical event; and so forth. The third step is to arrange the stickies into a collage that creates a visual representation answering the question for reflection—in our case, "What factors in my life account for my current understanding of whiteness, race, and racism?" Finally, the visual representation is shared with others.

Through telling the stories represented by our collages, we got to know each other on a deeper level. For example, as Daniel studied the way he had clustered important people from his life, he observed, "I realize how many people of color loved me enough to stick with me as I learned. Seeing all their names in one place helps me realize how much love is required in order to do this work." Andrew described tears in his mother's eyes as the car radio brought to life the violent events of Selma. "My idealism was shattered," he explained. "I was a little boy who suddenly understood that the world was not just." Rose revisited many memories, now painful, of how she learned racism from her parents' bigotry: "I remember watching my mother rewash any drinking glass that our African American maid had used. And my father's attitudes about Mexicans were so negative!" Robin explained how an incident from twenty years ago exposed her sense of superiority and entitlement. After arriving at an annual festival where she had served as a leader for several years, she found that an African American colleague had put her personal

belongings in the desk that Robin had used in the past. Describing how she imperiously moved the colleague's belongings because they "appropriated" her work space, Robin told us, "I didn't see this as racism. I felt, 'How dare she take over my desk? This is where I always work.'" Remembering the subsequent fallout, Robin recalled, "It was a hard lesson, beginning to see the difference between my walk and my talk." The focal point in Victoria's collage was a volcano that represented a two-year period of rapidly escalating awareness. Pointing to a small stick figure being blown into the air by the volcano's force, she explained, "Everything I thought I knew didn't apply." Louise's voice became quieter and quieter as she described her collage. With tears welling in her eyes, she told us that she felt self-conscious about how her stories compared to others. Louise's feelings reminded us that we are as prone to judging ourselves as "bad white people" as we are to judging others.

The collage experience helped us become more vulnerable to each other, deepening our trust. It was an example of presentational knowing, defined by Heron (1996) as an intuitive grasp of patterns in our experience, discerned through use of graphic, plastic, moving, musical, or verbal art forms.

2005: Being a Good White Person Is a Process, Not a Destination

Embedded in all our interactions was the ever-present "good white person" whom we thought of as a person whose motives were sometimes suspect and whose actions were often ineffective because of self-righteousness of the kind Daniel felt when he had dinner with Jane. Group members used a common refrain, "There I go again. Thinking I am the good white person."

This signifier continues to guide our learning, as, for example, when a journal editor invited us to respond to an article about to be published. In the article, the author explored her personal learning about herself as a white person in a multiracial environment. Cautious about the delicacy of our task, we drafted a manuscript in which we tried to be tactful in suggesting that the author's consciousness was narrow and naive. When we discussed our draft, we realized that we had fully embodied the self-righteous "good white person" who strives to educate the less informed white person and, in the process, display his or her own superiority. We were dismayed by how grievously our practice fell short of our espoused values and intentions.

This experience heightened our efforts to learn how to be more effective in talking with people about white hegemony, white privilege, race, and racism. We encapsulated what we had been learning into a concept we called "critical humility," which we defined 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 taking action in the world. Asking ourselves, "How can we get better at acting with critical humility?" we formulated questions to guide personal critical reflection about successes

and failures with practicing critical humility (European-American Collaborative Challenging Whiteness, 2005b).

We soon had an opportunity to test our guiding questions. When Victoria shared an experience in which she failed to speak out when racism manifested at a meeting she attended, we decided to role-play how she might have acted with critical humility. Andrew and Daniel volunteered. When the role play was finished, Louise observed, "Even though they were trying to be humble, they still seemed to be showing the woman how she was wrong. It sounded patronizing to me." As both Andrew and Daniel agreed with Louise, we tried using the questions we had recently developed. With the questions and the group's supportive prodding, Daniel gained insight into his desire for approval from people of color, and Andrew described how he prevents himself from being genuinely vulnerable.

Seeking greater capacity to live critical humility as a way of being has absorbed our group's attention for the past two years and has led us to greater clarity about the "good white person." We now realize that by focusing on the behaviors and attitudes that white people often use with good intention but poor effect, we turned the "good white person" into another iteration of the "bad white person." Reflecting on our use of this signifier, Andrew observed:

Actually, trying to be a good white person is a *good* thing. There is nothing wrong with striving to become a good white person. The problem comes when you start thinking you actually *are* a good white person and even more so if you think that you need do nothing in order to continue to be one.

SYNERGISM OF ACTION AND REFLECTION, EXTENDED EPISTEMOLOGY, AND GROUP LEARNING

Our intention with these snapshots is to provide rich illustration of how CI looks and feels in practice, in particular, how the CI process helps a group deepen its knowledge through the synergistic interaction of three practices: repeated cycles of action and reflection, extended epistemology using four interconnected ways of knowing, and group learning. Although our group's longevity enhances our learning, CI groups of shorter duration also experience synergistic interaction of the three practices described here (Yorks & Kasl, 2002).

To illustrate this synergy, we have described how our group complexified its meaning making, using a signifying phrase of "good white person," reflecting critically about distortions and limitations in our perspectives about the signifier, formulating a vision of "critical humility," and experimenting with how to actualize critical humility as a way of being. Each of these phases in our meaning making included multiple spirals of action and reflection, during which

we used the four different ways of knowing: individual and group actions provided new encounters with experiential knowing (Daniel's experience of seeing himself as Jane, Victoria's experience of failing to speak out, the group's experience of bearing witness to the role play) that we explored and reflected on through the presentational forms of story, visual art, and role play. Through analytical discussions, we created new propositional understanding, which we formalized periodically by writing about our evolving ideas. We tested our practical knowing by striving to live our everyday lives in congruence with our new knowledge, setting off new cycles of reflection and action. Our collage experience demonstrates how presentational knowing engenders intimacy and vulnerability, which foster the conditions of mutual respect and trust that group learning requires.

REFLECTIONS

Reflecting on what we learned from writing this chapter, we continue to feel humbled by the fundamental paradox of our inquiry into white supremacist consciousness: the more we learn how to become conscious about this habit of mind, the more we see how our deep embeddedness keeps us unconscious. Evolution in the way we understand and use our signifier "good white person" provides a ready example. Our 1998 snapshot shows us engaged in dualistic thinking, contrasting the good white person with the bad, even as we noted ironically that the good white person might be the enemy within because of the way we sanctimoniously felt a need to set ourselves apart. Through our process of reflecting on our experience as we wrote the chapter, we became more aware of how our signifier reinforces dualistic thinking, which is not useful in the conduct of our inquiry. Critical humility is a practice and an aspiration that helps us keep going. We also note that our collaborative writing process is itself a form of action and reflection that develops our capacity for critical reflection on both our thinking and our practice.

In writing this chapter, we are reminded how important a sense of community is while doing this work. As Edward W. Taylor (2007) reports in his update on transformative learning theory, "It is . . . trustful relationships that allow individuals to have questioning discussions, share information openly and achieve mutual and consensual understanding" (p. 179). The relationships in our group continue to be the foundation from which we take risks, share emotions, support and challenge one another, and develop shared language and understanding of our experiences with being white. In this context, we were able to move through our shame and guilt about our unearned privilege and come to new understandings of whiteness. Recalling some of our pivotal moments provided us with a sweet reminder of what our collaboration has

brought to our lives and how love has fueled our continued willingness to meet and learn about a subject like white supremacist consciousness.

Finally, writing the chapter also helped us sharpen our awareness that presentational knowing has been a catalyst for some of our most transformative moments together. This awareness reaffirmed our long-held intentions to broaden our ways of knowing beyond the propositional and practical realms, to include more feelings and emotions in our work together by using art, movement, poetry, and storytelling. Although we espouse the power of the presentational, we see that we tend to work in a predominantly “white” fashion. We reflect on ourselves as adult educators who frequently advocate multiple ways of knowing to our students and colleagues, but get together and talk and analyze for hours. With this fresh reminder of how presentational practices have led to our most significant moments of sudden understanding, we have recommitted ourselves to engage presentational knowing more frequently and systematically.

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