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Race and Racism: A Critical Dialogue

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Abstract: This is a dialogue between Elizabeth Peterson, a black, female adult educator and Stephen Brookfield, a white male. The question was whether or not we could come together and engage in a critical dialogue about race and racism.

Introduction

We (Stephen and I) feel that a dialogue that focuses on race and racism is one that is long overdue. So we made a commitment to question the positioning of White epistemology as the theoretical norm in adult education and the implications such positioning holds for the generation of knowledge in the field as well as the dominant policies and practices of the field.

Positioning Ourselves in Critical Race Theory and Critical Theory

Elizabeth: Like most Critical Race Theorists I believe, given where we are today, racism will always be with us. I believe one of the reasons we have such difficulty coming to terms with racism is that we don't even necessarily know what we mean by it—we have no common understanding of what racism is. We certainly don't feel the impact of racism in the same way. So perhaps we should begin our dialogue by defining racism. What is racism and what are some of the different ways that we have encountered it? Most CRT scholars define racism as a phenomenon that is socio-political in nature and embedded in the very foundation of our society. In order to understand racism you must understand the Founding Fathers and the compromises they made that made slaveholders men and the slaves they owned five-sixths of a man (or woman). On the other hand most Whites identify racism by the single acts of racism. Calling someone by the "N" word is racist, lynching is racist, but enjoying the privilege of being White—that's not racist. For many Whites the Civil Rights Movement took care of racism because it made open acts of discrimination illegal, but they do not recognize that People of Color encounter subtle and legal racism on a daily basis from White people who sometimes have no idea they are giving offense and even when they do pretend they are powerless to do anything about it.

Because of this difference in perception hostility often develops when Whites who feel they are not racist because they have not engaged in any overtly racist acts are confronted with the fact that they do enjoy White Privilege and that this makes them inherently racist. I feel if there is any chance of eradicating racism it we must come to a common understanding of how racism works in this society, we must recognize it for what it is.

Stephen: I work within a critical theory tradition that always starts by analyzing how power relations are created and maintained through ideological control. Given that one of the chief ideologies in the USA is White Supremacy, I have always thought that a racialized critical theory could serve as a useful tool for understanding how this ideology operates and how it might be challenged. To me it's no stretch at all to apply concepts of critical theory – alienation, commodification, hegemony, ideology – to the question of race, particularly to the ways Capitalism and White Supremacy are intertwined on a global as well as local level. This is why

I'm interested in people like Lucius T. Outlaw, Cornel West, bell hooks and Angela Davis who draw on critical theory in this way.

How do our racial formations and racial identities frame how we act and think as adult educators?

Elizabeth: I've had so many experiences in my life that have forced me to take a close look at who I am as a Black woman and what that means to those I interact with. I am aware of how I have to be in the world, how I have to act and the things I have to say in order to support others around me. I remember once assigning Peggy McIntosh's article on unpacking whiteness and later having a student come up to me and ask, "do you really *think* about being Black?" She seemed somewhat taken aback when I quickly shot back, "every day of my life."

"Why?" she asked. And my response was, "because if I don't remember, I will be reminded. And the reminders are usually never pleasant."

The incidents that shaped my racial identity occurred when I was rather young. When I was nine years old my family moved to the suburbs. Before that I had grown up in an inner city neighborhood that was predominantly Black, but with a sprinkling of other groups. Although it was in the city it was a real close-knit community—everyone knew everyone. As kids we walked to school. We walked to church on Sundays. We played outside in the yard—it was safe. I really didn't think about race at all until we moved to the suburbs and I became Black. I remember the day I was called the "n" word for the first time. Three of my 4th grade classmates thought it would be fun to call me up on the telephone and call me names. I picked up the phone, heard what they were calling me, dropped the phone and began to cry. My mother retrieved the phone and hung it up. She and my father then sat me down and they told me to stop crying. They were sympathetic and they said they knew it hurt—it was the first time. They assured me that very day that it would not be the last time and so I must learn how to deal with it. Crying wasn't the answer for them, action was. They asked for the names of the boys who had called me and reluctantly I gave them the names. I can remember begging my mother not to make me go to school the next day, I did not want to face those boys. She wouldn't hear of it—I was going to school and I was going to school with my head held high.

When I got off the school bus the next morning I was surprised to see that my parents were already there. They were in the principal's office for a long time. When the door finally opened the principal came to my classroom and one by one the three boys were called out. After a time they came back, one of them crying and looking very distraught, the other two defiant, but all three with apologies for me. After they apologized they went to their seats and didn't bother me again—ever. From that day until I graduated from high school I was never called the "N" word by a classmate again. Of course my parents were right—it wasn't the last time, but it didn't happen again for a long time. I asked my parents what happened that day in the principal's office and they both said that they went in and simply told principal that they were not going to stand for it. They made it clear that as a student in that school I was due the respect and consideration that every other child received. They made it clear what their position was and the principal agreed. It's interesting because the principal was a White man who looked at that time to be ancient although he was probably only in his sixties. But the point is that he appeared to be just the kind of man who would not be at all bothered by White boys calling a Black girl a nigger.

I learned from that experience that there were White people who would see and understand my perspective and when the circumstances called for it they would act in my behalf. Perhaps as Bell and other CRT propose the principal's was willing to act on my behalf because

he felt that somehow it was in his interest to do so—interest convergence—but even now looking back, it doesn't matter why he did it, he did what was right.

That was the first of many incidents in my life where I've suddenly and painfully been confronted with the point Cornel West (1993) makes; race indeed does matter. Even now with a doctorate and nearly twenty years in the academy I know there will be times when none of that means anything to those I will encounter. Nothing will matter but my color. Racism is still with us even in higher education. There is the assumption—I guess it stems from the liberal tradition—that education in and of itself advances a people to higher levels of understanding and morality—the classical belief that there is “truth” and there is “beauty” and that those who are better educated will have more of a grasp of these. That's the story. It has been my experience that a better education is not equivalent to a better understanding in people who don't want to understand anything other than what they already feel they know. If a person has determined you are inferior they persist in these beliefs despite the fact that they are presented with new information and challenged by new experiences that should indicate otherwise.

Stephen: Two pivotal events in adolescence and early adulthood helped disrupt and challenge the way White Supremacy moved in me. The first was at the age of 17 when I was being beaten up by a gang of White youths (they were ‘rockers’ I was a ‘mod’) in Banbury High Street one Friday night. A Black American GI serviceman from Upper Heyford Air Force base crossed the street and broke up the fight telling us “everybody's got to be cool now.” That man saved me from potentially severe injury. In my memory I was on the verge of falling to the floor as the GI intervened. Being born in Bootle and having grown up in Liverpool I knew that once you were on the floor things got a lot worse because then people could kick you in the kidneys and head. That event formed what CRT calls a counter-story that disrupted the White Supremacist script forming in my head (which said that Black people are violent and start fights and White people are peacemakers who sometimes have to use force to reign in Black instigators of violence). The second event was rooming with Terry, an Afro-Caribbean, in college. We shared a love of cricket (the West Indies were regularly thrashing England at the time) and I naively assumed that all Black people, and particularly all West Indians, shared a common identity. White Supremacy trivializes the vigor of Black intellectual life by assuming that all Black people think alike, and that therefore one only needed to speak to one Black person to get the ‘Black’ perspective on a topic. That this was not true was brought home to me when I came home after attending a meeting addressed by a Trinidadian revolutionary activist, Michael X. Terry was appalled. “Why do you want to go and hear him?” he asked, “he's nothing but a rabble rouser”. In the ensuing conversation it became clear I had been woefully ignorant of the debates, different positions, ideological divides and different analytical constructs present in Caribbean, let alone Black, intellectual life. Once again, White Supremacy was interrupted.

But despite disruptive moments and events such as these White Supremacy moves in me as it does in all Whites. First, my skin color means that for my whole career I am used to seeing as the gatekeepers in adult education people who look like me. Now I suppose I am one, continuing the unproblematized White Supremacy norm. I never have to question my right to publish something and White epistemology is something bred into my neural synapses (more on this below). Racism – the ugly operationalization of the ideology of White supremacy – moves in me in ways that constantly catch me by surprise. I see a Black pilot enter the cockpit of the plane on which I'm traveling and catch myself thinking “will this flight be safe?” In classes I catch myself holding back from challenging students of color and realize my so called ‘concern’ masks an embedded racist consciousness which says that ‘they’ can't take a ‘strong’ challenge from a

White person. Clearly, racism moves in me. I find myself quickly granting paper extensions to Black students and can only assume it springs from a White Supremacist judgment that because Black students are not as intelligent as White students, of course they will need more time to complete their work. It is deeply sobering to realize how strong and enduring is the successful ideological conditioning of White Supremacy.

How do we see race and racism in theory, research and practice in adult education?

Elizabeth: Stephen, I think it's interesting to hear you speak so candidly about racism and how it affects you personally. To me the way I've seen and experienced racism in adult education is through the absolute unwillingness on the part of some adult educators to acknowledge that there is racism in the field. In research and theory development over the past decade has been driven by a critical discourse and while there has been an attempt on the part of some to expand the discourse to include race and gender the truth is that it is still grounded in a Eurocentric rationality that attempts to "explain" every aspect of humanity. Often as I read articles and listen to presentations I am reminded of what Richard Delgado (1995) described as the "Imperial Scholar" when he said, "It does not matter where one enters this universe; one comes to the same result: an inner circle of about a dozen white, male writers who comment on, take polite issue with, extol, criticize, and expand on each other's ideas. It is something like an elaborate minuet."

I've had the experience of feeling like I'm caught up in the minuet that Delgado speaks of. I've read all the "right" authors. I've read the books on critical theory, perspective transformation, critical feminism, postmodernism, all of the "isms." I can cite Habermas, Mezirow, and even Stephen Brookfield. I know I am guilty of perpetuating the minuet, but do I have a choice? I must participate in the dance or lose credibility. I find ways to contribute to the discourse, to add my own dance steps as do my colleagues who are of color. The frustrating thing is that often the insider circle is so closed; you must be invited into the circle. I'm reminded of the whole incident with HER. I can remember being very excited about the idea of contributing to a special symposium devoted to racializing the discourse of adult education. The fact that HER was interested in the topic was exciting in and of itself, but I was also excited about the possibility of joining with you, Ian, Scipio, and Vanessa in creating what I felt was the first attempt to take our field to a different level. I can remember feeling like I'd been slapped in the face when it was suggested that your article would be featured and we, as African American scholars would be invited to respond to it.

There is this smugness on the part of some who would in one breath profess that they are opening doors and acting as champions of democracy while they still maintain control of who actually gets let through the door.

Stephen: I too see the dominance of White epistemology in the field. The practices governing the way official knowledge is produced in adult education academic discourse communities (university departments, journals, research conferences, graduate programs, book publishers) resolutely affirm the inherent superiority of the rationally-driven, intellectual lone wolf. This notion of the self-contained intellectual engaged in an individual, single-minded pursuit of truth is the intellectual embodiment of Eurocentric rationality. It is no surprise that self-directed learning has produced such a swathe of reports, articles, dissertations and studies, that work on critical reflection and transformative learning overwhelmingly skews towards models of personal change and transformation and away from social movements and organized political opposition. It is also no surprise that solo-authored pieces are judged inherently more

scholarly or rigorous than collaboratively authored pieces. I also see racialized intellectual border crossing as overwhelmingly a one-way movement of traffic. Black scholars are expected as a matter of course to be familiar with critical theory, transformative learning, andragogy and so on. No such requirement is placed as a matter of course for White scholars to know the central tenets of Africentrism, to know the difference between an Africanist and an Africentric scholar, to understand the splits in African American intellectual life over the validity of an Africentric paradigm and so on. Black scholars are expected to know White scholarship fully before they can be allowed to ‘do their thing’ and explore Africentrism, Black Nationalism, and the dynamics of the Black Liberation struggle. The converse is not true: White scholars’ interests are the unproblematized norm and publishing in these areas is seen as the ‘natural’ direction for scholarship.

What do we think we do right in our team teaching?

Elizabeth: I think we’ve managed to get a few things right in the way we’ve approached team teaching. Through the variants that we introduce during the first term the doctoral students are exposed to Africentrism and Critical Race Theory. They can’t leave the program not knowing that there are these other lenses through which people see the world. As the teaching team I think we’ve always been respectful of each others perspectives. Because we are all together as a team we’ve learned from each other and I think the students have seen us engage in each other’s paradigms as we’ve modeled the kind of questioning of ideas and the thinking through process that we hope they will become a part of. I don’t know if this happens in other programs. I’ve had a couple of students tell me that they appreciate the fact that we do this—that we don’t always see eye to eye on different issues related to the field because we are looking at these issues from very different perspectives and we let them know what these perspectives are.

Stephen: We scrupulously allocate classroom time and curricular focus to include analyses of race and racism, Africentrism and critical race theory. Students cannot complete the program without engaging with race. We strive to be reasonably knowledgeable about each other’s areas so that any one of us could teach any module in the program. We never ask each other to speak for our respective races. When appropriate we clarify the racial dynamics that lie behind our teaching practices and decisions. We catch early indications of confusion, racism and resistance to engaging with race in the anonymous Critical Incident Questionnaire we ask students to complete at the end of every class. We stress constantly that racism is a systematic, structural phenomenon, not a matter of individual choice or personal prejudice, and that for a White person to say “I’m not a racist” (implying he or she has escaped the ideological inscription of White Supremacy within them) is therefore untrue, nonsensical even.

Conclusion

This is just a small example of how two people can come together and talk about a subject that is so often difficult to broach. It is difficult because in order to talk about race you have to dig deep and bring to the surface painful memories, awkward moments, circumstances and situations that have long been buried. We have to be willing to be exposed, to face rejection. But we hope that we’ve shown that when people are committed to talking about race and racism we don’t have to fear. Elizabeth can analyze the enduring nature of racist White Supremacy without excluding Stephen from the conversation. Stephen can admit to his racism and not fear that hatred and rejection would come from Elizabeth regarding that admission. Racism is systemic in a society that privileges whiteness. Stephen benefits from the privileges that his

whiteness bestows and the fact that he can admit it is the first step in making the choice to change. It is scary to make the first step, but we hope one that leads to new possibilities.

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