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Carole Barlas

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Developing white consciousness through a transformative learning process.

Carole Barlas

Abstract: This qualitative case study sought to examine a process of group learning in which individuals and group experienced a transformative change in consciousness about white privilege. This study resulted in understanding one process for expanding capacities for continued transformational learning.

Introduction

Racism continues to be a large and troubling issue throughout American society. Racism has become institutionalized at every level of society and the consequences are destructive to both white people and people of color. Lack of consciousness of white privilege is a key factor in perpetuating this situation. There is a need for developing the kinds of learning processes that effectively arouse and expand consciousness through catalyzing the expansion of ontological and epistemological capacities in order to help white people recognize how embedded they are in a white cultural perspective. Applying these learning processes can serve to begin to transform those institutional and social practices that perpetuate racist discourse. The purpose of this paper is to report, through case study findings, on the experience of thirteen white people who engaged for six months in a process designed to change their consciousness about white privilege.

The inquiry process used in this case study was developed by a Chinese national (Tang, 1995) who has lived in the West for the past decade. It has evolved out of his personal experience in understanding and synergizing the very divergent cultural perspectives within himself. He calls this process Synergic Inquiry. The fieldwork and analytic perspectives and processes of this process are eclectic. The perspectives are informed by elements from Constructivism (Patton, 1990) and Systems Theory (Laszlo, 1972). The processes are informed by elements from Dialogue (Bohm, 1990), grounded theory and heuristic inquiry (Patton, 1990). The processes of Synergic Inquiry are closely related to Jack Mezirow's (1991) theory of adult learning. Mezirow describes what a developmentally progressive perspective looks like: that it is inclusive, discriminating, integrates experience and is open and permeable to alternative perspectives. However, he does not offer much in the way of how to do this. Learning processes focused on the transformation of meaning perspectives through the examination of premises and assumptions are fundamental to Synergic Inquiry.

This study exemplifies a systematic inquiry process that engages people in examining their own and others people's consciousness at three different and interrelated levels of consciousness. This process works at all levels of systems: individual, group, organizational, and societal. In this study, participants went through this process for the first three months examining their consciousness on the individual level. During the second three months, a collective knowing

evolved from which there developed an aggregate group consciousness that included all three levels of consciousness.

Methods

This study was qualitative in design and used case study with descriptive methods as an approach. The participants in the study were nineteen adult doctoral students in Cohort configuration and two faculty members from an integral studies institute in the Western part of the United States. They were together for six months using the Synergic Inquiry learning process to develop their awareness of the relationship between deeply held assumptions and their embeddedness in their cultural perspectives with the intention to increase their capacities for expanding their consciousness around racism. There were six African-American students and thirteen European-American students. These participants separated out into white and black sub-groups. A white faculty member also was a participant in the white group. Participants met approximately twice a month in various configurations of whole group and sub-groups. This study is focused specifically on the white group experience.

In the first cycle of the Synergic Inquiry process of differentiation and integration, the white group examined and reflected upon its consciousness using action and reflection cycles. Initially, each member of the sub-group reflected on her/his Self-Knowing, examining personal consciousness on three levels of consciousness based on the work of Robert Vachon (1995) : Visible, which refers to actions, behaviors, physical manifestations; Logical, which refers to rationalities, epistemologies, worldviews; Mythical, which encompasses deepest beliefs, faith, spirituality.

Then, each participant gave a verbal presentation of her/his Self-Knowing to the sub-group. The other members of the sub-group were then given the opportunity to ask questions about the presentation in order to deepen their understanding of this personal perspective.

The next phase of the Synergic Inquiry process involved exercises in Difference-Holding. This is where the sub-group participants "switched consciousnesses" with one another, in effect, "trying on the other's shoes". Holding multiple consciousnesses led to a creative a tension from which the next phase evolved.

The final phase, Difference-Transcending, was the phase in which different perspectives were held within a new, expanded consciousness. This phase brought the new consciousness into action and led to the development and application of a synergic group consciousness. (It should be noted that these phases may appear as linear processes but in actuality were more spiral and cyclical, each occurring within each other.)

Having done the above process as separate groups, the white sub-group and the black sub-group each developed a deep knowing of their individual group's collective consciousness. The black sub-group and the white sub-group then interacted with each other in a second Synergic Inquiry cycle of differentiation and integration, following a similar process as stated above.

The data were collected from a series of individual and sub-group consensus reflection papers, participant observation, computer on-line conversations, video tapes of group interactions and video-taped interviews. The individual reflection papers and on-line dialogue were sources of information about the "what", "how" and "why" (corresponding to Vachon's Visible, Logical and Mythical levels of consciousness) of the learning participants gained about themselves. The sub-team reflection papers were a collective effort to reflect on these questions on the group learning level. These papers were written after each Synergy phase. A final sub-group paper was written at the end of the entire process.

The participant observations and video tapes were a source of information about the context and emotional and physical interactions and responses of the participants. The video-taped interviews brought out participants' individual stories and were additional sources of individual reflection on the meaning of their experience.

Findings

This research found that in using the Synergic Inquiry process, the participants learned how to transform and expand their individual and group consciousness about white privilege. Through learning experiences created and designed by the group itself, participants identified elements at three levels of consciousness. At the Visible level they identified chaos and tendency towards objectification as key elements of white consciousness, which create "othering" and "isms." At the Logical level, they identified their assimilation into white culture as the key element. They found that giving up their heritage in order to "fit in" created a tendency to normalize "acceptable losses". They identified this social norm as a construct that sets up the toleration of the concept of acceptable losses in a way which dehumanizes and oppresses. At the Mythical level, they identified monoideism as the key element of white consciousness. This was interpreted as the holding of a singular reality which becomes the dominant perspective and thus leading to objectification, hegemony, and white supremacy.

The following are some examples of the reported awarenesses and Self/Other-knowing experiences that generated the capacity for expanded consciousness on all three levels. It should be noted that these levels of consciousness are interrelated and feedback to each other.

The following statements are situated at the Visible level of consciousness. They are sub-group reflections that followed a performance presentation by the white group of its collective white group consciousness to the black group.

We struggled with articulating our group consciousness collectively. We can't seem to wrap our arms around it. I suggest that this struggle *is* our white consciousness. As the dominating voice in our culture, we haven't had to look to see who and what we are. Therefore, our discordant, messy, chaotic April presentation: individuals wanting and seeking connection and not having a clue how to do it.

"Self and Other" was identified as a constructed dualism which sets up the conditions for "isms" to exist.

Some of the visible elements we identified are: rugged individualism, tension between group and individual, isolation, loneliness, conformity...these values drive our behavior and create objectification, "othering" and "isms".

Sense of self and behavior are some of the manifestations of the Visible level of consciousness. The following depicts the reflective response of a white male participant.

...it isn't that I use fear or shame to ride to a new level of consciousness, but rather there is an emerging cycle of emotions that move me kind of in a spiral fashion...it starts with pride, arrogance or hubris...then moves to sadness or a dying or a feeling of letting go, a surrender to the true truth feelings. And finally, I renew myself or I awaken with a sense of responsibility to do something different in my life or in my area of influence.. It is what I realized last night as my path to white consciousness and accepting my privilege and using it appropriately in the world.

Three Jewish women who were part of the white sub-team acknowledged that, in spite of their white skin color, as Jews they were part of a marginalized group in this culture. This helped them to comprehend the price to be paid for assimilation. This individual reflection paper articulates the way in which one Jewish participant had an embodied meaning-making experience at the Logical level of consciousness.

The grief was so deep, I felt my whole body shake...Grief at what I had lost of my precious heritage and culture, grief at my parent's collusion in raising me assimilated so I could pass, fit in, "be American"--in a way they never had. I understood. Suddenly I knew part of the reason for my emptiness inside; I knew for me, the deal was no good, the bargain had failed. Through my parent's effort to help me "belong", I had missed an opportunity for the most important belonging, the belonging to my past and my people...I felt such anger at the trade of my Jewish birthright for the privileges whiteness could offer.

The following remarks are taken from a transcription of a white group conversation in which team members were reflecting on their current self-knowing as a group.

...Its so hard to give up what you think you know so well. It hurts...Because you don't know what's going to be ahead of you when you let go. It's like jumping across a crevice and it's that space in mid-air that's so scary...It's about awareness and never seeing things the same way again and the fear of how that will change our lives forever...I can't go back and I'm not sure about going forward...We are increasingly willing to let go of our embedded thinking and surrender to our processes of transformation... We have learned that the white consciousness perspective is not the only perspective or a superior perspective.

This next piece is a Mythic-level reflection from an individual reflection paper. In it, the person speaks about a Difference-Holding experience that involved her participation in a spontaneous skit in which the white participants "tried on" the identity of African-Americans.

At the mythic level, the part of me that in no way can bear (pretending to) being Black because the fear of the pain is too overwhelming, so I'll go unconscious to keep my head buried in the sand and hold on to my privilege, to protect myself..because if I truly let in a piece of the depth of the experience (I can never know the full depth of the experience, since I am white), of the pain and the suffering, my life would have to change...Yet I already am changed, I already am experiencing life differently, on a daily basis I feel more pain and discomfort about racism.

Another participant in this skit who was taking on the role of an African-American walking down the street tells of how she was roughly thrown up against the wall by one of her sub-group members who was in the role of a white police officer. She described her embodied response as surprised, fearful and humiliating.

Sensations went all the way through me to my core with a deep embodied knowing of the arbitrariness and pain and ugliness of making distinctions based on external traits. Even though I felt that I believed that we exist in a one/many reality, I realized how much I do to deny our connection and interrelatedness as human beings.

This next Mythic-level sub-group knowing is taken from a collective sub-group reflection paper:

...at times we have felt despair at the amount of work which we believe needs to be done in order to create a critical shift in the inherent social power dynamics in the United States and around the world. Nevertheless, we believe that the first step to "writing a different story" is identifying key elements which are driving the perpetuation of the current white consciousness story. It is through identifying the myths which drive us and the beliefs and assumptions which feed our actions, that we can choose what parts of our collective white story need to be rewritten and what metaphors and images we choose to embrace in our new story. Further, we believe that the act of deconstructing our existing story of white supremacy is the process of beginning to write a new story of white consciousness.

Conclusions/Discussion

The Synergic Inquiry process effected the consciousnesses and the meaning-making processes of the participants. Examining the white group's experiences and the way they integrated these experiences in their personal and academic lives while participating in the Synergic Inquiry process gives insight into the transformational dimensions of this process.

Engaging in this process resulted in a shift in white group consciousness and an expanded capacity for continuing this transformational learning within individuals and the group. Using the principals of differentiation and integration, Synergic Inquiry created a framework in which people were supported in participating in dialogic thought and expression.

Synergic Inquiry provided a systematic process for the participants to develop capacities to delve deeply into their unconscious assumptions. Conditions such as compassion, truth-telling, respect and love created a context within which they were able to inquire deeply into themselves and others and examine these assumptions and begin to integrate other perspectives with their own. Embodied experiences around critical incidents during the process led to the development of an openness and permeability to alternative perspectives. There was a discovery that white consciousness was really white unconsciousness. In the concluding words of the final white sub-group paper, one person observes "Our pain of not knowing who we are, of not knowing who we are not, of not wanting to know who we are, and of avoiding knowing how we embody those characteristics we fear in others...and this nurturing of our capacities to hold multiple ways of being is more than learning... We experience moments where self and other penetrated one another and a knowing of the whole was present...We are healing into greater wholeness and integration of new ways of being."

The significance of this study is that although there are some valuable theories on transformative learning such as Mezirow's, there is very little on how to implement and apply such theories. This study informs adult education practice by demonstrating through case study, one approach which works with differences as a catalyst for transformative learning. Many of the "isms" have become institutionalized in education in everything from policies to pedagogies. There needs to be more discourse on transformative learning and its processes so that social change can be facilitated within our educational institutions.

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