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Learning to Unlearn White Supremacist Consciousness

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Abstract: *Using cooperative inquiry as a self-directed learning strategy, people of European-American descent learn to unlearn white supremacist consciousness. Facilitators of changed thinking and behavior include relationships of trust in the all-white inquiry groups and relationships with people of color in participants' daily lives.*

Using Cooperative Inquiry to Learn about White Supremacist Consciousness

The purpose of this study is to describe how people with the power and privilege conferred by white skin used cooperative inquiry as a self-directed learning strategy to change their consciousness and behavior. Specifically, this study reports the learning experience of people of European-American descent who voluntarily participated in a cultural consciousness project sponsored by the California Institute of Integral Studies. Four different cooperative inquiry groups met during the course of an academic year to pursue the topic, "the meaning and impact of white supremacist consciousness in my life." Each group formulated its own specific inquiry question within the parameters of this topic.

The term "white supremacist consciousness" describes a consciousness that takes for granted the legitimacy of having white norms and values dominate U.S. society. That this consciousness is often invisible to those who hold it strengthens it as a force for hegemony. Coming to consciousness about hegemony and the racism hegemony fosters is similar to a process described by Ruth Frankenberg (1993) as race cognizance. The discourse of race cognizance perceives difference among races and embraces these differences as autonomous systems of multiple cultures that are equally valid. Frankenberg contends that many well-intentioned white people in the United States overemphasize all people's essential sameness and engage in a discourse of color- or power-evasiveness, commonly called color blindness. Awakening to white supremacist consciousness is for us a process of becoming aware that white norms of thinking and behaving exist, that they are only one among many cultural constructions for human beingness, and that "color-

blindness" from the summit of white privilege perpetuates racism and systems of domination.

Cooperative inquiry (CI) is a systematic strategy for self-directed group inquiry that has been developed over the past thirty years as a research method (Heron, 1996) and recently studied as a liberatory structure for adult learning (Bray et.al., 2000). Of the four groups participating in this project, some adhered more closely than others to procedures for cooperative inquiry, but all actualized, in some form, essential principles of the CI process. Groups engaged in cycles of action and reflection in which they made meaning from members' own life experience. Participation was voluntary. There was a shared commitment to democratic participation, shared responsibility for facilitation, shared intention to engage questions about white supremacist consciousness and to test the group's emergent learning through some form of putting the group's ideas into practice.

Nineteen participants worked in four different cooperative inquiry groups of four to six members. One group met for five months, two for the full academic year, and one continued to meet into a second year. One of the groups was convened online, with members not meeting face-to-face until a culminating event at the close of the academic year. Three of the groups were all women, while one group had two men. Sixteen of the participants were graduate students, though not all were studying at the school that sponsored the project. Some students registered for academic credit; one group included both students and faculty.

Research Procedures

One of the CI groups decided to investigate the impact of the CI process on participants and invited

the project coordinator to join them as a research team. We, the authors of this paper, are that team. We interviewed the thirteen others who had participated in the project during the 1998-99 academic year, asking them about changes they perceived in themselves and about how the inquiry process had influenced these self-reported changes. Finally, we asked them to reflect on the particular experience of being in an all-white group as a context for the inquiry.

The interviews were taped and transcribed and the full data-set coded independently by each researcher. We then met as a team for several rounds of reflection. Analysis and interpretation in this paper are based not only on insights precipitated by the interview data, but also on reflection about our own experience during the original inquiry. Thus, the findings represent the outcome of a dialogue between our analytic understanding of the interview data and our experiential knowing from our own group's inquiry.

For this short report, we have selected a few descriptors of changes in consciousness and a few examples of the changed behaviors participants attribute to their CI experiences. We then offer insight into why the process proved to be an effective change agent for these learners.

Changes in Consciousness Regarding Being White and Actions Based on Changes

Participants entered the inquiry groups with different levels of awareness or consciousness regarding white hegemony. These different levels existed on a continuum, ranging from complete unconsciousness to a passionate disdain for "other" white people because of their racism. Helen is typical of one end. She describes her initial lack of awareness, even "a lot of denial" about the existence of white supremacist consciousness and then continues, "now [I] think how closed my eyes were to some things. How could I not have thought about white culture or white consciousness? It's amazing to me, now that I look back, where I have come from there."

Further along on the continuum were people who suppressed any thoughts of race and racism in an attempt to be colorblind. Ann, who has two Chinese daughters-in-law and a practice that includes African-American clients, explains that she was aware of her privilege as a white person. Her awareness led her to attempt not to "see people as that differ-

ent, not wanting to offend anyone." She says that through engaging with her inquiry group she "got over that idea that we have to [be colorblind. Instead, we have to] face it and know it is here and be aware..." Ann says she has come to realize that good intentions, no matter how well meant, are "not enough."

At the other end of the continuum were people who disdained the company of "unconscious" white people. Brooke comments on how the inquiry group provided a place for her to "move through my anger" at people who are unconsciousness about racism. Prior to being in the group, I was aware when I saw any of the "isms" I'd have anger come up. And [my cooperative inquiry group] helped me with finding a way to work with the anger..." Robin remembers that when she started her cohort-based graduate program,

I wanted a non-Eurocentric learning environment. I thought, "white people have nothing to teach me, they're not worth my time." I learned so much in our cohort work about what I could learn from white people that I didn't really expect the cooperative inquiry group to teach me anything new. I just joined it because Victoria invited me, and because I wanted to learn how to use the method of cooperative inquiry. I was mistaken. This has been an incredible learning for me about the possibility of white people learning to be in relationship, to be connected with each other.

Learning Compassion

Even though the nineteen participants entered the inquiry process at different points on this continuum of white supremacist consciousness, almost all had in common several significant changes in consciousness. One of these changes was a new compassion for themselves and other white people when they expressed racist thoughts and behaviors.

Eleanor's new compassion helps her pay attention to prejudiced thoughts. Before her CI participation, she was so ashamed of having prejudiced thoughts that she "would just close them down so fast that they wouldn't really have contained any reality for me..." In contrast, she now notices such thoughts "in a little moment" of awareness. She notes that "[w]hen that happens I feel a little bit scared, and a little bit kind to myself, at the same

time.” With compassion for herself on these occasions, she thinks “I need to give myself explicit permission, not exactly in words, but to say to myself, ‘It’s okay to have the thought. It is all right.’” Because she has learned to be “a little bit kind” to herself, Eleanor now can stop repressing thoughts that shame her. Instead, she can notice them, reflect on them, and learn from them. “Like one time I called Pedro Pablo... letting that be what it was, you know, and having it be remembered and real...I was able to experience myself in my own race, racist kind of mental reactions.”

Rachel entered the inquiry process with personal strong commitment to uncovering racism and disdain and anger toward less aware white people. During the inquiry, as she deepened her capacity to recognize her own oppressor behavior, she began to understand how she was like those she disdained. Former feelings of anger towards other white people were transformed by compassion for them, and for herself. he comments,

I’m always reluctant to find out how much more of myself is white supremacist... [I]t is what we [her CI group] often called that white fog—the psychic fog that wants you to keep doing things the way that you’ve always done them and [not] look...it’s the dominant culture [that] doesn’t want us to look...you can get very full of rage and go after that oppressor and when you find out you’re the oppressor, it’s a little more ticklish to go after that oppressor, because you’re having to go after it in yourself all the time.

Learning about White Norms

Other changes in consciousness include a deepened appreciation of the debilitating effects of white norms of individuality, disconnection, and dualistic thinking. The online group reflected frequently on how learning to be a “good girl” had disconnected them from authentic interaction with others. A second group, after crafting an action in which members were to observe their authenticity with people of color, came to realize that they didn’t know how to be authentic with each other. All members of that group agreed that this recognition was a watershed. Rachel describes how the meeting created “such a deep sense of connectedness that I don’t think there was any turning back for any of us. It was almost like having a vision. [After that meeting] we were

now something we weren’t before. We were now some kind of whole.” In Gretchen’s group, creating a supportive place to express different viewpoints resulted in what she called “a sacred experience,” one in which “the connection that we felt with each other shifted, so that that separateness had moved into a fluidity.” Gretchen reports how she has come to realize that when she separates herself from others, as if there is a “moat” around herself, then she “can’t really be empathic or connected to life.”

Changing Behavior

Participants’ changing worldviews translated into changed behaviors and actions in the world. These changes range from developing new awareness of racist thoughts or white privilege to initiating systemic changes in workplaces.

Daniel, reflecting on his increased awareness, says that there are more “people of color present than just a few years ago” at gatherings in his home, which to him suggests “some sort of fundamental shift in how I show up in the world.” Rachel tells us about how colleagues of color in her municipal workplace notice her changed attitudes and the frequency with which she calls attention to racist practices. Brooke describes her increased ability to “find a way to deal with situations where I can speak to it [racism] in a way that the person could hear me.” She notes that she used to strike out in anger and her new approach makes her more effective when she confronts people about racist behavior. Brooke also reports that because of the CI project, she chose to seek supervision from a woman of color in her training as a psychologist, despite the difficulty of locating such a person at her school.

Many participants talked about changed participation in the workplace. Ann, who had previously tried to maintain an aura of colorblindness, is now “more liable to ask a client who is Black about race, rather than act like it sort of wasn’t there.” Marge is proud that the diversity workshop she developed has been formally scheduled as part of the professional development program in the college where she teaches. Eleanor, who is a writing teacher in a highly diverse community college, has changed her teaching and influenced school-wide change. Before participating in the CI, she never asked her students to write about their cultures or their experiences with discrimination, in part because she thought it would be unethical to ask disclosure from her stu-

dents when she did not know how to be disclosing about herself. She also believed that if she talked about racism, it would “be like reinforcing it and make it more powerful and more oppressive to minority people.” As a result of her CI experience, Eleanor asked her remedial writing class to write about personal experience with racism. She completed the assignment herself and volunteered to be first to read her paper, which described through a vivid critical incident her own struggles with understanding how to confront racism. “I read mine first and you could just feel the whole room shift. It was really powerful because, I think, of how honest I was. It was hard for me to be this way and, you know, they knew that.” Like Marge, Eleanor also created a diversity workshop for college faculty and administrative staff. Her workshop spawned the rejuvenation of a disheartened institutional diversity committee, who sought and received a new budget allocation of \$10,000.

Understanding How the Process Facilitated Changes in Consciousness and Behavior

Each group was unique. Members came with different levels of awareness about the inquiry topic, and different attitudes and skills about cooperative inquiry as a process. In spite of group differences, common themes stand out as important in understanding how the groups’ processes facilitated growth and change among the participants.

Vulnerability and Trust

The role of vulnerability and trust are described by all groups. In the online group, members spoke often of embarrassment, noting they had created enough trust with each other that they “were able to share embarrassing things that we were ashamed of and embarrassed about in an open and honest way, and to be really supportive of each other...” Marge remarks, “I could see the process of becoming more vulnerable. In one way, it reminded me of the Last Judgment (laughs), when you are stripped naked and all your deeds are there for everyone to see, especially for oneself to see...we built up a confidence and I think we helped each other. As one person became more open about her experience, it allowed the rest of us to do that as well.” The group’s capacity to develop trust was greatly facilitated when it arranged to have its online workspace deleted, rather than archived at the end of the se-

mester. Sally explains, “One of the things we realized was that the online environment holds your words forever...in a group you could say something that was embarrassing, but that was it. Here it lingers. Someone could go back a year later and read it again. It just felt as though we were carving our vulnerability into stone, exposing our self, so we were really reluctant to talk about some things [until we arranged to have the conference deleted at the end of the academic term].”

Tara, a member of the group that started its work mid-year, describes a different kind of trust. Tara came into the project with considerable experience in anti-racism and multicultural work. She explains that there are many aspects of racism that she feels comfortable in talking about in a multi-ethnic group, but that she is reluctant to talk about difficult personal interactions with people of color. She “felt safer to talk to other white people about stuff like that because I wasn’t worried that I would be hurting someone’s feelings, or expecting them to come in and teach me....” However, Tara does not often talk with white people about these issues because she finds them often to be defensive or unconscious about racism, unable to help her hold herself accountable but instead prone to go to some “weird place” like telling her “Oh, that’s reverse racism.” She explains that her CI group was different, “I want somebody with a deep understanding of the dynamics of whiteness and racism to hear me so they are supporting me in the way they should be supporting me, and they’re not supporting any [racist conditioning] that comes out of me.” When Tara was involved in a troubling situation with a woman of color, she brought her “feelings and the whole experience” to the group. “So I was trusting that this group would do that [not support her racist conditioning] for me, and they did...I allowed myself to just dwell in my own subjective experience, and I rarely will do that with other white people....”

Fullness of Learning from Experience

Tara’s phrase, “dwell in my own subjective experience,” expresses an essential element for understanding how this experience in CI groups composed only of white people enabled the participants to grow in changed consciousness and changed behavior. Cooperative inquiry is a systematic strategy that helps people learn from their own experience. Its architect, John Heron, has written

extensively about the role played by feelings and emotions in enabling the learner to become fully conscious of her or his experiential knowing (Heron, 1992).

When feelings of shame or distrust block us from fully experiencing our experience, it cannot become a source for learning. In each of these CI groups, when members speak about the importance of vulnerability and trust, they are referring to a dynamic that enables them to become more conscious of their own experience. For example, Eleanor told us that before she participated in her CI group, when “prejudiced thoughts” came into her mind, she would “just close them down so fast that they wouldn’t [contain] any reality.” Now she has learned to give herself “explicit permission” to have the thoughts, notice them, and learn from them.

Having practiced vulnerability in their CI groups, participants are more likely to try out new behaviors in other contexts of their lives. The inquiry group is a place to practice, as for example in Rachel’s group where members decided to learn to be authentic with each other, or in Eleanor’s group where she practiced “being brave” about naming racist thoughts and practices.

Another important factor in the success of these groups was the presence of people of color in members’ lives. Many participants work in diverse settings or live in diverse communities; most were involved in academic programs where multiculturalism and racism were key content areas of the curriculum. Thus, even though participants flourished from the unique benefits afforded by an all-white context for inquiry, the people of color in their lives were also a strong influence on their learning. Ann explains, “there were always spaces in the circle where we had people of color sitting even though we couldn’t see them. It was just feeling their pres-

ence and the stories that we would bring back from encounters we have had, it felt like they were there with us.”

Conclusions

White people often mask their experience from themselves. When that experience is related to race, racism, privilege or hegemony, the motive to separate themselves from their experience is strong. They may be repressing their prejudiced thoughts, which they are ashamed to discover exist. They may be afraid of making visible their own “unknowing,” – either to people of color whom they want genuinely not to offend, or to white friends and colleagues who might judge them as ignorant and insensitive. In our study of these four CI groups, each group achieved a context of trust sufficient for participants to be able to be vulnerable enough with each other that they could “dwell” in experience and learn to challenge pervasive habits of mind. We recommend adult educators familiarize themselves with this liberatory practice and strategies for its facilitation.

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