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Race and Adult Education: A Critical Review of the North American Literature

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Abstract: *The paper critically evaluates the North American literature showing how race has been treated historically and presents three perspectives on race that inform contemporary research.*

Adult education mirrors the world in which we live and can play a significant role in reproducing or changing the status quo. North American society is a place replete with hierarchical systems that privilege some and deny others. While the stated goals of adult education have consistently been set forth (Cunningham, 1988) as aspiring towards leveling the playing field for all adults just the opposite often occurs. This unacknowledged and unintentional mis-education occurs along many lines of demarcation that confine a disenfranchised populace by race, class, gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. By discussing race in this paper, we do not imply that it is the only salient issue affecting our society. However, it is our contention that race can serve as a consequential lens through which to view other oppressive systems.

The paper is framed by two points about race. First, race is a social construct that has no basis in biology (Gregory & Sanjek, 1994). Anthropologists and biologists have long recognized that the human form cannot be examined through visual or scientific inspection to definitively determine a person's race. It is, at best, a fleeting notion established by an arguable set of physical characteristics. Secondly, although race is a social construct, its effects are real in terms of social power and privilege (Giroux, 1997). Race is an invisible presence that helps to determine how society functions. This ordering of the world occurs because, as a person is categorized as belonging to a race, that person is also accorded all the privileges and baggage that accompanies the classification (McIntosh, 1995). To be White in the United States and Canada is to be the norm and this ability to blend in is the currency of access to all things better in society. The President's Commission on Race (One America, 1998, p. 46) defined this currency as the "institutional advantages based on historic factors that have given an advantage to white Americans. ...we as a nation need to understand that whites tend to bene-

fit, either unknowingly or consciously, from this country's history of white privilege."

Our position is that to discuss race in adult education, we must recognize the ever-absent concept of whiteness (Giroux, 1997). The purpose of this paper is to critically evaluate the literature from this position by examining: 1) how race has been treated historically in adult education and 2) three perspectives on race that inform contemporary action in adult education.

Race and Adult Education: A Historical Perspective

As historical documents that were written to define the field, the eight Handbooks published from 1934 through 1989 provide a useful lens for examining how race has been conceptualized in adult education. We take the Handbooks as representative of how leaders who have defined what matters in the field understand key issues. Even though these texts span 55 years of American history, they tell a surprisingly contemporary story about how issues of race have intersected with the practice of adult education. Although race is a central location for the negotiation of power and privilege in education and in society, it has never formed the focal point of a single chapter in the entire corpus of eight Handbooks. The way that race has been socially constructed in the literature over the past half century has been remarkably stable. This view is that the White race is the norm against which all other races are to be compared. Although race is a central location for the negotiation of power and privilege in education and in society, it has never formed the focal point of a single chapter in the entire corpus of eight Handbooks. The way that race has been socially constructed in the literature over the past half century has been remarkably stable. This view is that the White race is the norm against which all other races are to be compared. This perspective is so deeply embedded in the social fabric and lan-

guage of U.S. and Canadian cultures that there has been little discussion of adult education for Whites even though the White race has constituted the vast majority of the population for adult education. The exception was one brief mention made by Rowden (1934) in her article, "Adult Education for Negroes" in the 1934 Handbook in which she compared the adult education efforts for Negroes as lacking when contrasted to that provided White students. In other Handbooks, there is no mention of race at all (1960, 1980), while the rest discuss adult education for Negroes (1934, 1936), American Indians (1948), and racial and ethnic minorities (1989), meaning Blacks, Hispanics, and Native Americans. Whenever race is discussed in the Handbooks, then, it is conceptualized as non-white. Of course when one group is normative, the others are viewed as abnormal. This leads to the obvious conclusion that separate chapters would be needed to discuss the specific educational efforts being made to address the needs of these "special" populations.

Although race is a social construct, there is no doubt that its effects are real in terms of the distribution of power and privilege in society. The authors who spoke to issues of race throughout the 55 years covered in the Handbooks support the view that non-White groups have disproportionately little power and access to material and cultural resources. In an early Handbook, Locke (1936a, p. 126) argued that adult education for Negroes was being driven by the "idea that it is important as a special corrective for the Negro's handicaps (underprivilege and social maladjustment)." A similar view is expressed in the most recent Handbook (Briscoe & Ross, 1989, p. 583), which selected Blacks, Native Americans, and Hispanics because "all three groups have experienced inequality in educational opportunity and participation," largely because of racial discrimination, economic disadvantage, and de jure and de facto segregation. While the Handbooks are clear that discrimination against non-White groups is an important social problem, three different educational solutions were proposed.

The first proposed educational response is what we now term "multicultural education." In the 1948 Handbook, Locke noted (p. ix) that: "Group education for social, intercultural, and international understanding looms up from the context of today's living to become the paramount problem and primary concern of the educator." This education was

to serve the interest in producing a "sound society," by providing all people with "training for citizenship and for full and willing participation in a democratic society" (p. ix). This group education for democracy would come from an education that stressed a knowledge and understanding of all groups that make up society: "It would seem that a much better chance of promoting unity and understanding is promised through the cultivation of respect for differences and intelligent interest in group achievements and backgrounds, and through preaching and practicing reciprocity instead of regimentation" (Locke, 1936b, p. 226). This multicultural theme has carried through to the most recent Handbook with Rachal (1989, pp. 5-6), who says that: "Adult education's greatest responsibility may well be a fostering of social tolerance and interdependence."

Kotinsky proposed a second practical educational response to discrimination, which she argues results from prejudice: ". . . a mounting threat is abroad in the land, irrational hate among persons and groups—a problem which, it would appear, is ultimately soluble by educational means alone" (1948, p. 101). Like Locke, she supports intercultural education that seeks to develop "attitudes of understanding and respect among groups and individuals of different backgrounds, whether racial, religious, nationality, or socio-economic" (p. 101). Unlike Locke, she does not believe that knowledge is sufficient to develop this understanding. She believes that educators must see that "race prejudice is closely related to the emotional needs of the individual...For some it provides compensation, making up for severe inferiority feelings. . .others find in a minority a target on which they can release their rancor without suffering too much social disapproval" (p. 106). Thus, she calls for the need for "emotional re-education" for those in the dominant racial group, which she implies but does not name as Whites.

London (1970, p. 13) echoes the theme of discrimination by concluding from census data that: "Negroes and other minorities are subject to many disadvantages which have their roots in discriminatory practices, inferior education and the particular occupational distribution that reflects inferior status and limited opportunity." However, unlike other authors, London specifically locates the problem in the "insidious character of white racism that infects our society" (p. 13) using the famous

quote from the 1968 Kerner Report that: “What white Americans have never fully understood—but what the Negro can never forget—is that white society is deeply implicated in the ghetto. White institutions created it, white institutions maintain it, and white society condones it” (pp. 13-14). London believes that “Adult education can have a significant role to play in the attack upon racism and discrimination” (p. 15). However, unlike Locke and Kotinsky, London argues that: “providing improved educational opportunities . . . is not sufficient to deal with the unequal distribution of life chances in our society [because] piecemeal attack upon the problem of discrimination is insufficient to influence the drastic changes that we must secure if this problem is to be reduced or eventually eliminated” (p. 15). Thus, in a third form of educational response to discrimination, London pushes for a comprehensive social and political effort, alongside the educational opportunities, “supported by our government, our major institutions and the responsible leadership in our society” (p. 15).

Current Educational Responses to Issues of Race

We have divided the many contemporary perspectives on race in adult education into three broad categories that are associated with different forms of practical action by adult educators.

Color-blind Perspectives

Although not named in the literature as a form of educational response, the most widely used approach to race in adult education is one that is unnamed, which we refer to as the color-blind perspective. Generally, race is not discussed directly in the adult education literature and it can therefore be assumed that race is not a significant topic or one that impacts the field in any serious way. However, the missing discussion on race means the exact opposite. Race is of consequence to our practice and by omitting the topic we assume that there is a normative race.

Color-blind perspectives are manifested in two ways. First, most of the literature on theory, research, and praxis sets forth norms that appear not to be based on any one group. However educational sociologists (Sleeter & Grant, 1987) agree that most of these norms are based in middle class white Protestant values that are considered the foundation of North American culture. These values emphasize individual merit and rights, competition, and free-

doms (including democratic ideals). Examples of agreed upon norms are abundant in the literature. For example, most of the praxis literature which discusses how to use small group activities is predicated on the idea that individuals, as learners and teachers, will speak and act freely in sharing their opinions. But what happens when the learner’s culture places more emphasis on the community than on the individual and therefore encourages the individual to refrain from sharing personal ideas or concerns? If the group contained Hispanics, African Americans, and Native Americans whose group cultural values are community based (Banks, 1997), climate setting could be compromised. The second way that the color-blind perspective is manifested is in its prescriptions for adult education practice. Nearly all discussions of teaching in adult education simply avoid the racial dynamics that are omnipresent in the real world (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 1997). Such a script presents the view that all students are equal and all teachers are unbiased. By stripping learners and teachers of their place in the hierarchies of social life, this view assumes that we stage adult education where the politics of everyday life do not operate.

Multicultural Education

A central idea that is shared by all types of multiculturalism is that one culture is seen as dominant and therefore the educational need is to teach the importance of values and beliefs that are held by other cultures. Therefore from its inception multicultural education has called for recognition and inclusion of the contributions of other cultures in the literature, research, and praxis. According to Guy (1996), the idea of multicultural education was first introduced in the adult education literature by Kallen in 1915 and expanded on by Locke in 1925. Locke represents a segment of the field that champions the multicultural argument by making known the causes and worth of certain groups. He expressed a belief in the redemptive powers of multiculturalism (Locke, 1936b), a view that remains constant in contemporary adult education.

Martin (1994) describes five types of multicultural education (assimilation/acclulturation, cultural awareness, multicultural, ethno-centrist, anti-racist) that are present in the adult education literature. Guy (1999) expresses a cultural awareness viewpoint in setting forth the belief that recognizing and valuing African American vernacular English is one

way of improving delivery of literacy services. Another frequently held position calls for making changes based on the anticipated population increases of people of color. Ross-Gordon (1990) suggests that we examine the cultural underpinnings of our field and begin to keep pace with the changing face of society. Another multicultural perspective, ethno-centrism, which asks for the recognition of non-dominant groups is widespread in current literature (Hayes & Colin, 1994; Martin, 1994) and is predicated on the belief that if the merit of the group and the significance of their contributions is known then attitudes toward the group will be favorable. While this belief is rarely stated overtly, it seems the logical outcome.

Social Justice: Issues of Power and Privilege

The social justice perspective asks adult educators to live by the mission of the field which is to democratize the citizenry (Cunningham, 1996). Addressing not only the difference between groups, but highlighting how power is exercised in favor of one group and to the detriment of another, is the foci of the literature that addresses power and privilege (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 1997, 1998; Rocco & West, 1998). When the discourse on whiteness or privilege occurs in the literature, it usually involves the following: a recognition of privilege (Cunningham, 1996), an examination of classroom practices (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 1997, 1998), and examples of curriculum and or texts that reproduce privilege. A large segment of the literature in this category deals with the interlocking nature of race, gender, and class (Flannery, 1994; Tisdell, 1995). Cunningham (1996) states that until we act on what we know to be right and fair, "...adult educators are complicit with these political and economic arrangements" (p. 157) that keep the current system in place. Tisdell (1995) also discusses and critiques the interlocking nature of systems of power and asks that adult educators deal with these issues through curriculum design and praxis. Her recommendations call for direct involvement and action on the individual level. This view is also expressed by Flannery (1994, p. 22): "The valuing of the universal in adult education must be changed. New perspectives must be developed to overcome the racism and sexism inherent in universal understandings of adults as learners. As adult educators, we must engage in an honest critique of our theories and our practices." Flannery suggests how power

can be re-negotiated to challenge and eventually change the structure.

Conclusion: A Vision for the Future

We hope for a future when the missing discourse on race is absent because it is not needed. This would replace the current situation where the discussion on race is absent because White is considered the norm. In this future it would be very easy and quite natural for our foundational theoretical principles to include a conversation about race. Our dream for the future also includes an adult education where our classrooms, programs, journals, and conference participants mirror the diversity of our society. Indeed, it would be a time when the discussion on race flows instinctively and does not make adult educators uncomfortable. How can we get to that future? Our conviction is that adult education cannot continue to follow a color-blind or multicultural perspective. These views suggest that if we act as if there are no socially-organized barriers, the barriers will somehow disappear or that if we learn to truly appreciate each culture, parity will be achieved between all peoples. In contrast to these two beliefs, we are most aligned with the third perspective, which asks us to see teachers and learners not as generic individuals but rather as people who have differential capacities to act based on their place in the hierarchies of our social world. Our adult education practice must be based on an understanding that the power relationships that structure our social lives cannot possibly be checked at the classroom door. There is no magical transformation that occurs as teachers and learners step across the threshold of the classroom. We need to name the racial barriers that cause some learners to be over-privileged and others to be under-privileged. Thus, we believe that rather than a no-barrier thinking, we need barrier-thinking in adult education so that we may construct a future where race does not matter.

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