Casting a Wider Net: A Critique of the Boundaries Imposed by White Privilege in Adult Education

Elaine Manglitz
University of Georgia, USA

Lisa Merriweather
University of Georgia, USA

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Elaine Manglitz and Lisa Merriweather Hunn
University of Georgia, USA

Abstract: In this paper, we review and critique the literature on white privilege to identify ways the Eurocentric culture undergirds our social practices in adult education. Africentrism, an alternative to Eurocentrism, will be used as an example of how the discourse can be expanded. Finally, we will offer recommendations for the field.

Introduction

Adult Education as a field has a legacy for issues related to social justice, social change, and democratic practices. The idea that education in adulthood should open opportunities, level the playing field, and combat societal injustice held a prominent position in the early years of the field's organization. Though their tactics were different, early pioneers of the field, such as Alain Locke (Guy, 1993) and Eduard Lindeman (1989), viewed adult education as a viable means of developing a more just society for all of the nation's people.

Over the years many of the leaders in the field began to place more emphasis on issues related to professionalization causing the focus to shift from the inequities in the American society and from those members of society who experienced those inequities. This shift moved adult education further afield from its social justice roots and extolled scientific rationality, a Western or Eurocentric way of knowing, as the premier means of constructing knowledge and developing models of practice in adult education. Moreover this way of knowing became accepted as the normative standard against which other knowledge forms were compared, resulting in Eurocentric norms and values being masqueraded as foundational truths upon which the field was to grow and thrive.

While the adoption of Eurocentrism by the field is problematic, its full effects are even more insidious and troubling. "Today more than ever, American society depends on adult education systems to spread information and knowledge, develop skills, and shape attitudes" (Stubblefield & Keane, p. xi, 1994). People from a multitude of backgrounds actively participate in the field as learners, practitioners, administrators, and researchers. When one way of knowing consumes the field, others ways are more easily dismissed and deemed as inferior resulting in "hierarchical systems that privilege some and deny others" (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2000, p. 147). This privilege is enjoyed by European Americans and denied to all others and often goes undetected and unchallenged. "The dominant culture also prescribed an education appropriate for that status, using education to instill its own values and ensure its continued domination" (Stubblefield & Keane, p. 7, 1994). Adult education has been and continues to be complicit in the effort to ensure Eurocentric hegemony (Colin, 1994).

The *Handbook of Adult and Continuing Education* is a prime example of this complicity. It has long functioned as a guidebook or exemplar of discourse for the field (Wilson & Hayes, 2000). By foregrounding critical reflection as one way that practitioners and researchers can examine and make explicit the theoretical frames that guide their work, the authors constructed a handbook that privileges theory development and implementation based on a predominantly Eurocentric paradigm. In essence, alternative ways of knowing and conducting practice were not explicitly endorsed.

Although there have been important efforts to highlight perspectives and ways of knowing and learning besides the dominant one (Colin & Preciphs, 1991; Colin, 1994; Guy, 1996; Sheared, 1999), we still believe that the pervasive nature of Eurocentric norms and white privilege, specifically, and the continued dangers in developing a field, which esteems a democratic ideology, from a narrow frame of reference are important to examine and critique. The purposes of our paper are to review and critique the literature on white privilege to identify and outline ways the Eurocentric culture undergirds our social practices in adult education, to explore Africentric perspectives as an alternative way of constructing knowledge and approaching our practice, and to offer recommendations for the field of adult education. By explicating the role of White privilege and presenting Africentrism as an alternative lens, we hope to continue the process of expanding the discourse in adult education beyond its typical boundaries shaped by the imperceptible presence of white privilege and its relegation of other knowledge bases to the sidelines.

Whiteness and White Privilege

During the last decade of the twentieth century, there was an increasing interest within several disciplines, including sociology, speech communication, cultural studies, and critical race theory, among others, in foregrounding and interrogating whiteness as a marker of power and privilege and in investigating its impacts on our social and educational practices. Multicultural educators also began to address white privilege and its accompanying influences on curriculum, educational practices, and pedagogy within our educational institutions (Sleeter, 1995), as did adult educators who began to examine how whiteness and its resultant power and privilege undergird and perpetuate systems of domination and opportunities within adult education practices (Barlas, 1997; Colin & Preciphs, 1991; Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2000; Shore, 1997, 2000, 2001). It is important for the field of adult education to understand and use the efforts from all arenas of social science that have attempted to name white privilege and the power that underlies it, as well as the effects on educational systems and opportunities.

Several insights have emerged from the broader social science literature that has examined whiteness and white privilege. Much of the scholarship has as its focus the goals of uncovering and disrupting the ways that whiteness has functioned as the norm against which others are viewed and judged, along with unveiling the political, social, and cultural mechanisms through which whiteness is invented and used to mask its power and privilege (Giroux, 1997). One theme that has emerged from the efforts to scrutinize the social construction of whiteness and its naming as a racialized identity has been to show how white identity has been constructed, shaped, and appropriated historically (Rodriguez, 2000). Historical studies have connected the salience of whiteness to the formation of class, nationhood, and empire in the United States and Europe (Frankenberg, 1997; Jacobson, 1998) and have examined the historical relationship between whiteness, power, representation, and oppression. Other common themes emerging from this literature include: an awareness that all racial categories are socially constructed, fluid, and impacted by changing historical, social, and political conditions; the recognition of the impact of interlocking oppression and privilege; the assertion that whiteness and white privilege is used to position others as inferior with real and compelling effects on people; the importance of examining whiteness within the contexts of power, institutional and cultural systems, and the need to address systemic and institutionalized racism by creating spaces for whites to examine their own identity and how it is implicated in racism in the United States and European nations (Giroux, 1997; Rodriguez, 1998, 2000).

Colin and Preciphs (1991) named white racism as a specific problem in adult education and outlined the impacts of white racism on white practitioners' perceptual patterns, demonstrating how these patterns are reflected in adult education practice. They provided examples of how the distorted perceptual patterns lead to biased interpretations of learners' performances, including the impacts of labeling, the judgments made according to white skills and standards, the reflection of the white worldview in curricular materials, and the content of teacher/learner interactions. Since their seminal article (Colin & Preciphs, 1991) other examinations of white privilege and racism have appeared within the adult education literature. To date these works have examined adult learning theories and adult education within the raced, classed, and gendered lives of learners (Shore, 1997, 2000, 2001); adult education policy (Shore, 2000); white consciousness (Barlas, 1997; Barlas et al, 2000); and the historical and contemporary understanding of race and whiteness in adult education, along with the impact on research and practice (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2000). These adult educators have begun to foreground and assess whiteness and white privilege as one of the social positions that powerfully impacts institutional, teaching, and learning practices within adult education and are extending the knowledge gained from a broad examination of white privilege to the field of adult education.

Shore (1997, 2000, 2001) has highlighted how much of the adult education literature promotes assumptions that position whiteness as the invisible norm against which all others are compared. Learners who are other than white are often described in ways that position them as deficient and disadvantaged, in need of attention from the dominant group (Shore, 1997). Various social and cultural groups are targeted and urged to participate in programs based on their difference from the white norm, all the time assuming that of course they would want to aspire and achieve what the white center has (Shore, 1997, 2000). In their analysis of the historical and contemporary understandings of race in adult education, Johnson-Bailey and Cervero (2000) extend the analysis to show that in adult education we often fail to acknowledge that as some are named as underprivileged or at-risk, others, that is white students, are seen as the norm and their privileges and power go unrecognized. This has led to educational responses reflected in how we teach, write, and research, and practice (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2000).

Africentrism

Exploring how White privilege manifests itself in the discourse of adult education is one way of expanding the boundaries that it imposes. Another way is by including ways of knowing that are not rooted in Western rationality. One such alternative is Africentrism. Because of the long-standing relationship of people of African descent with adult education, the exploration of an alternative way of knowing that centers their history, culture and experience is quite appropriate. Africentrism provides a belief system or a worldview that is consistent with and honors the culture of the people of the African Diaspora.

While Africentrism is not a monolithic entity, it can be described by three principles. They are centricity, traditional African values, and purpose. These three principles provide a firm foundation upon which one can begin to structure education based upon an alternative knowledge paradigm. Centricity is key to understanding Africentrism. Centricity is the "idea that African ideals and values should be at the center of any analysis involving African culture and behavior" (Okafor, 1996, p. 699). Centricity "is an easy task for white students in America. Almost all experiences discussed in American classrooms are approached from the standpoint of White perspectives and history" (Daughtry, 1992, p.9). Eurocentrism leaves little room for "other" centrisms. And in the case of the African American, it not only worked to exclude African centeredness but it also sought to

portray African centeredness as inferior. Traditional African values such as communalism, interconnectedness, and spirituality, are in natural conflict with the values, like independence, detachment and rationality that are espoused by Eurocentrism. Theory development and implementation and knowledge construction that is built around the latter may be less relevant for people who esteem traditional African values

The final component is purpose. Purpose becomes the means through which African Americans navigate through problems like racism and discrimination. One way that it does this is that it questions the right of dominant culture to legitimize knowledge and those who produce it (Asante, 1988). " In every revolution, the people have first seized the instruments of idea formation…"(Asante, 1988, p.31). When the frame of reference changes such that it emanates from one's cultural center, it becomes a means of liberation. Purpose involves deconstructing negative self-images and rebuilding the internal structures of the mind to reflect one's intrinsic worth.

Most adult education is based on Eurocentric norms, values, and history. There is nothing inherently wrong with using these norms in practice but when the norms are seen as universal and other norms and value systems are excluded, then it becomes problematic. Colin (1994) discusses issues surrounding this in adult and continuing education graduate programs. She states that "Eurocentric norms and perceptions dominate the academic environment" (p.54) and that the "acceptance of the Eurocentric worldview excludes the sociocultural and intellectual histories and life experiences of African Americans" (p. 59). Africentrism de-centers Eurocentric perspectives and allows for the centralization of the African American perspective for African Americans.

Africentrism can be one vehicle through which adult education can honor its foundational ideals. "The task is not to replace one ethnocentrism with many….Rather, it is to recognize that those ideals have yet to be fully lived up to in our scholarship…" (Appiah, 1998,p. 188). Africentrism challenges the presumed universality of the Eurocentric paradigm in adult education classrooms. In the process it creates space for the voices of the many who have been purposely ignored and dismissed. It challenges the field of adult education to live up to its principles.

Implications

All of the work done to foreground whiteness and white privilege within adult education provides evidence that we, in adult education, are beginning to name, examine, and critique its impact on adult education. An examination of the tenets of Africentrism opens up a relevant and powerful means to include ways of knowing that are not rooted in Western rationality. What can we learn from the investigations into white privilege and Africentrism and the impact on our social and educational practices that can help us identify not just ways to critically review our own practices but move us toward practices that are truly more socially responsible and inclusive? How can this examination help us tear down some of the boundaries constructed by an almost exclusive reliance on technical rationality as the primary means for constructing knowledge within our field?

We need to build on the efforts that have already begun in adult education, including work done by Sheared (1999), Colin (1991, 1994), Guy (1996), and others to emphasize the importance of writing, teaching, researching, and learning in a way that is bold, truly inclusive, and reflective of non-mainstream worldviews. In this way we can build a community of researchers and practitioners who are able to support and challenge each other in their efforts to move forward and construct responsible, socially just practices that confront the boundaries of adult education and open the benefits to many people. For example if we extend the work of Colin (1994) to its logical and practical end, we can begin to open the discourse of the field. She suggests that the "sacred cow" of graduate curricula be revamped. She challenged the professoriate to be accountable for knowing

about and understanding knowledge that is constructed from an Africentric theoretical frame. In doing so it allows the field to cross the boundary imposed by sole dependency on Eurocentric ways of knowing.

In addition, curricula and courses that examine the social, historical, and cultural contexts of adult education should recognize "white" as a racialized identity that has not formed and existed in a vacuum; it needs to be examined, not taken as the standard or norm. Researchers and educators need to teach and bring an understanding of the historical perspectives and analyses of white privilege, along with the social, political, and educational effects of that history to classroom discussions and research. As Colin (1994) noted, "the curricula must be based on an analysis and synthesis of all available literature" (p.57).

All adult educators in America practice within the confines of a society that favors Europeans Americans and all have the responsibility to continue to confront hegemonic privilege. White adult educators have the additional responsibility of acknowledging our own privilege and being willing to articulate and share our journey as we do so. We need to develop ways to be white without dominating and subjugating people in the process, making clear the connections between whiteness and privilege while at the same time offering alternatives and actions we can take.

Adult educators have been socialized within the normative order of American and Western society where prejudice and institutionalized racism is intrinsic to society. We believe that there is a relationship between educational theories, policies, and practices and the larger society and that it is possible to challenge and transform relations of power within education and society in spite of our socialization by actively examining whiteness and integrating alternative perspectives.

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