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Who Can Speak for Whom? Using Counter-Storytelling to Challenge Racial Hegemony

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Keywords: Critical Race Theory, Counter Storytelling, Racist Discourses, Positionality

Abstract: Dialogues of socially significant forms of human difference such as race are constrained by hegemony. Critical Race Theory's counter-storytelling is explored as a means of challenging the majoritarian stories that reinforce racial hegemony in the dominant discourse.

Introduction

I remember playing a game called telephone when I was a child. One person would think of a message and then relay that message to the person sitting closest to him or her. Then that person would pass the message to the person sitting to his or her side and the message would continue until it reached the last person who would then report to the group the message that she or he heard. Invariably, Parts of the message would be deleted or added resulting in a message that was, in short, distorted and inaccurate. The message repeated was different from the original message causing us all to laugh hysterically

In graduate adult education classrooms—as in other adult educational settings— dialogues of race, gender, sexual orientation and other socially significant forms of human difference are difficult and frequently constrained by the emergence of an ideologically conservative, dominant hegemonic discourse that seeks to reframe and rearticulate the experiences of persons of marginalized groups. As suggested by the opening example, communication is easily re-interpreted in a way that bears little resemblance to the original message. Depending on how experiences are understood, interpreted and framed, “existence is recognized or refused, significance is assigned or ignored, beings elevated or rendered invisible” (Goldberg, 2000, p. 155) within hierarchies. Critical race theorists argue that counter-storytelling may be a useful mechanism to challenge and change racial dominance (Solorzano & Yosso 2002; Tate 1995).

Counter-Storytelling

Storytelling is a powerful means for creating meaning as well as challenging myths (Delgado 1989). Counter-storytelling is a tool that CRT scholars employ to contradict racist characterizations of social life. Counter-storytelling also aims to expose race neutral discourse to reveal how white privilege operates within an ideological framework to reinforce and support unequal societal relations between whites and people of color. Solorzano & Yosso (2002) define counter-storytelling as “a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told” including people of color, women, gay, and the poor (p. 26). Counter-stories or narratives stand in opposition to narratives of dominance called majoritarian stories. Dominant narratives carry multiple layers of assumptions that serve as filters in discussions of racism, sexism, classism, and so on. In short, majoritarian stories privilege Whites, men, the middle and/or upper class, and heterosexuals by naming these social locations as normative points of reference. While majoritarian stories draw on the tacit knowledge among persons in the

dominant group (Delgado & Stefancic, 1993), they also distort and silence the experiences of the dominated. Whereas majoritarian stories speak from a standpoint of authority and universality in which the experiences of one group (Whites) are held to be normal, standard, and universal, counter-stories serve to undermine racist, sexist, homophobic, and classist narratives. Counter-stories facilitate social, political, and cultural cohesion, as well as survival and resistance among marginalized groups. Therefore, they need not be created only as a direct response to majoritarian stories (Delgado, 1989).

Types of Counter-Stories

There are three genres of counter-stories documented by CRT scholars: personal stories, other people's stories or narratives, and composite stories. Personal stories comprise direct reports of experiences of persons of color and how they experience racial discrimination, insult, injury or disadvantage. Other people's stories hold the power to move and when they are retold they take on a 'larger than life' quality. What begins as a particular, individual experience gains validation through the act of re-telling. Composite stories or narratives represent an accumulation, a gathering together, and a synthesis of numerous individual stories.

Solorzano and Yosso (2002) discuss two aspects of counter-storytelling: theoretical sensitivity and cultural sensitivity. The concept of theoretical sensitivity (Strauss and Corbin 1990) refers to the special insight and capacity of the researcher to interpret and give meaning to data. Cultural sensitivity (Bernal 1998) refers to the capacity of individuals as members of socio-historical communities to accurately read and interpret the meaning of informants. The import of these concepts for this paper is the idea of sensitivity to meanings embedded in narratives.

Our Counter-Stories

Tal's story. I was teaching a class on multicultural issues in adult education. One evening we were discussing the topic of the social construction of knowledge. I brought several props to illustrate the idea. One was a map of the world based on the Peters Projection. I showed the map to students and asked them to talk about the image. Most thought it quite different from the usual representation of the earth as in the Mercator Projection. We talked about why those differences existed and why we seldom, if ever, saw the Peters Projection. We went on to talk about how little we know about Africa and discussed colonialism and racism as two reasons for this. After class, a white male student said to me, "It's too bad about Africa. We should know more but it's a shame that Africa hasn't really contributed anything to world civilization." I asked him why he thought that. He replied that's what he had learned in school. I told him that I had thought similarly until I learned that Africa was the cradle of humankind and that the first civilizations were there in northeast Africa (Egypt). Research in a number of disciplines showed a strong connection between classical Egyptian civilization and other parts of Africa as well as ancient Greece and Rome. As I spoke, I observed that he started to 'glass over' – which I read as non-receptivity to my message. I suggested that we were both victims of mis-education and he nodded affirmative in response. I gave him several references to look at and he politely said thank you and departed.

Lisa's story. During my graduate program, I facilitated a session in a Multicultural Issues in Adult Education class for a professor who was going to be absent. In preparation for the class, I read the materials assigned to the students, I met with the professor and discussed the lesson plan. The plan included a whole class discussion and a small group activity in which the students would role switch. That is, they would assume the positionality of persons different than

themselves and were asked to critically reflect on how life would be different. I thought this would be a neat and “safe” way to get people to discuss “difference” and more importantly, what that difference meant within the context of adult education and our society.

I participated as a co-learner in one of the small groups after starting the activity. My small group was composed of two European American and two African American women. When the positionality characteristic was class, or gender, the discussion was awesome—very insightful, thoughtful, and dug far beneath the surface. I was thrilled to see how wonderfully the activity was going. Unfortunately, when the positionality characteristic was race, the depth of the conversation was shallow. I and the other African American woman tried many different ways to express how significantly race impacts one’s positionality but the European American women had difficulty understanding the privilege conferred by being European American. They couldn’t see how being an African American woman could so drastically alter the experience of being woman. Their position was that they could, in large measure, relate to the dimension of African American because of the oppression and discrimination that women face. Talking about race and connecting with the underlying forces that shape its contours proved to be impossible. As the small group ended, I felt very frustrated. When we debriefed the activity as a whole class, I realized that in all of the groups, race was the least explored aspect and the race talk that ensued was stilted and stifled. I was extremely discouraged and felt quite inept in my role as facilitator because I was unable to get my students to intellectually or emotionally connect with the concept of “race.”

Elaine’s Story. Several years ago, an African American colleague and I co-wrote a paper that was accepted at an African American pre-conference. Though we were unaware of this when we submitted the paper, only graduate students of African descent were allowed to present at this conference. When one of the originators of the pre-conference became aware that I was a White female, a discussion was prompted about the appropriateness of my presenting as a white person. Protocol and past practices were discussed, and the plan was for me to return to our hotel and discuss with my colleague that I should be at the pre-conference with her but that she should do the presentation alone. Both of us would be acknowledged as the researchers but only she would speak. We talked and both felt that the rules should have been made clear before we traveled the distance to present, especially since we were both going on our own dime. We disagreed on a key issue however; I thought we should present with only her speaking but she would not do it, saying that we had done the piece together and that we had not been told ahead of time that I could not present because I was white. She left for home the next day.

I spoke the next day with one of the founders of the pre-conference, the woman I had been introduced to and who had spoken up about me being white and not presenting. She related that the reason the pre-conference had been started was to provide African-American graduate students a forum to present in their space with colleagues and experienced members of the field who supported them. The pre-conference was begun at a time when the vast majority of presenters at the primary conference were white. I understood the reasoning behind the decision. I believe this story fits well with a theme of who can speak for whom, the power of counter-storytelling and the importance of having a safe space, but I am left at a loss for how we can move forward. Is our society still so encumbered by racism that we need separate spaces for some issues? Is this because all space is by default our (white) space and those separate spaces still need to exist? And how can we form coalitions to challenge white supremacy if we can’t listen to each other in a common space? Maybe this is the key – to have spaces where we can listen, talk, and interact respectfully but also have separate spaces until we no longer need them.

Comment [LM1]: Elaine, what issues did you disagree on. Do they have any relevance to this conversation. If not, or if you are not going to name the issue, this sentence may not need to be in here.

I am also left wondering where whites who are critically-minded fit in; is our role to work with other white people and explain our primary role in perpetuating racism as Malcolm X and others have often proclaimed? Where do we go from here?

Analysis and Discussion

Our stories reveal the underbelly of race neutral discourse. They represent stories not only of people who are oppressed but also a small cadre of Whites who are engaged in anti-racist practice. Inherent in all of our stories is the idea of privilege, which operates differently in each story. As an African American male professor, Tal invoked gendered privilege and privilege conferred by authority status but was met by resistance from the student, who also shared gendered privilege and additionally possessed White privilege. Lisa, as an African American female appealed to a qualified privilege, based on authority as a substitute classroom facilitator but encountered resistance from female students who enjoyed White privilege. Elaine, as a female who benefits from White privilege, and her African American co-presenter confronted resistance while innocently attempting to present at a conference created in response to the dominance of White privilege at the main conference. In each case, white privilege operated in the background to create the context in which the stories developed. It is the idea that posits the reactions we confronted as part of the normal mainstream discourse and similarly situates our stories outside of that discourse. It is behind the idea that our very questioning of the normative mainstream discourse is some how out of the ordinary and out of the realm of reason. Our lived experiences stand in stark contrast to the lived experiences of the “others” in our stories. That is, our positionalities as African American male, African American female and anti-racist White female, place us in a social location that offers a vastly different perspective from those in our stories. Much of it stems from the lack of shared experiences.

Comment [LM2]: What privilege have we named here.

For example, the white male in Tal’s story failed to genuinely connect with the issue of both he and Tal being mis-educated about Africa. For Tal, this mis-education was personal and engendered an emotional connection to Africa as both place and idea. But for the White male it was just an unfortunate circumstance. The White male’s ambivalence about the import of society being mis-informed about Africa’s legacy demonstrates the power of the majoritarian story. As Solorzano and Yosso (2002) state, “Majoritarian stories are not often questioned because people do not see them as stories but as “natural” parts of everyday life” (p. 29). The visual representation of Africa in the Mercatur Projection, an axiological and a psychological representation, devalues and marginalizes Africa and the Black people who live and claim her dependency. The “natural” way that we have come to understand Africa, and by extension African Americans is that it doesn’t count for much. Africa is absent in most serious accounts of culture, history, and civilization. To question this majoritarian story, and offer an alternative explanation in the way that Tal did validates the experiences of people of African descent and undermines the legitimization of the dominant ideology promoted through the White male’s majoritarian story.

Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) wrote “...discussions of race and racism continue to be muted and marginalized” (p. 47) and the issue of race is often decentered in the face of other forms of oppression such as sexism and classism. No where is this statement more true than in Lisa’s counter-story. One would think that in a class focused on the idea of multiculturalism that discussion around race would naturally emerge and be engaged in. This was the opposite of what occurred in that class. The majoritarian story told in that class was that race didn’t matter and that other forms of oppression such as sexism outweighed or were analogous to the oppression

represented in racism. Furthermore that story suggests that there is not a synergistic effect between being both woman and Black that results in oppression that is greater than either one when experienced separately. This counter-story highlights how majoritarian attitudes “carry layers of assumptions that person[s] in positions of racialized privilege bring with [them] to discussions of racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of subordination” (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 29). Lisa’s story draws attention to the silence that is prevalent around conversations of race in adult education and the necessity of preserving race as a salient construct in discussions of multiculturalism.

Elaine’s story is a special kind of counter narrative. In it, she has leveraged her privilege to speak with authority to describe how she sought to support an anti-racist goal. Her story brings to the forefront the complexities embedded in counter-storytelling. Many who are race-conscious accept as a foundational idea that “ideological” intellectual space must be created and preserved in the academy for persons of color to talk and theorize about issues related to the lived experience of being a person of color. Too often, as history has shown us, White people assumed the right to speak about them and for them, often resulting in scenarios of misrepresentation such as the one presented in our opening. At the level of the individual, Elaine and her co-presenter as well as the pre-conference committee members, were pained by the awkwardness and complexity of the situation. But the decision by the committee was driven by a larger societal goal. That is, the creation and preservation of space in which scholars in the African Diaspora could construct knowledge took precedence over the issues inherent in two graduate students traveling to present a paper that had erroneously been accepted for the conference. For white anti-racists, story telling must invoke anti-racist practice and experiences at multiple social levels. Bergerson (2003) suggests that “white scholars use CRT [Critical Race Theory] strategically” (p. 59) and encourages Whites to “take risks with other whites and with people of color as we engage in this endeavor” (pg. 59), the endeavor of eliminating racism, while being sure not to “assume to speak for people of color” (p. 59). Can Whites stand in the margins alongside of Blacks to “turn the margins into places of transformative resistance” (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 37)? How do we position white counter narratives within the broader discourses of anti-racism?

In our counter-stories, we faced the challenge of genuinely connecting our lived experience with “others” in relation to challenging and changing racial hegemony. When met with ambivalence, naiveté, and resistance, we were initially perplexed and dismayed by the reactions we received. However, our understanding of the very difference in our reactions reminded us to remain cognizant of the underpinning of white privilege and racism that existed in all the stories. Understanding the reasons behind our different reactions led us then to a deeper discussion of how racism works in our society and hopefully to better ways to chip away at its core. We still questioned the wisdom of sharing counter-stories with those who don’t share affectively, cognitively, or experientially in the experiences from which our counter-stories developed. Majoritarian stories are so powerful, and many people feel compelled to reject, ignore, and dismiss the evidence that calls the validity of these majoritarian stories into question. However, even as we acknowledge our disappointment with the reality that the sharing of our lived experiences often falls on unlistening ears, we also believe that this type of sharing plants seeds which in time will bloom and make the real life game of telephone obsolete in our academic discourses.

Conclusion

We agree that the principal virtue of counter-narratives is to expose dominant racial ideologies. They provide evidence as to how these narratives are false. To the extent that counter-narratives push us to change how we think, to develop ‘incredulity toward the meta-narrative of race’ that has a prolonged effect, they have an important, perhaps unique, educational value. However, they are complex interweavings of racial knowledge at multiple levels of understanding. Counter-stories can be read on several different levels. They can be a powerful individual testimony of resilience, ingenuity, and pain but can also bear witness to institutionalized and unequal social relations that the dominant culture tends to minimize or deny (Bell, 2003). Following Scheurich and Young’s analysis of racial epistemologies (2004), counter-narratives can be understood at an individual, institutional, and societal level. As such they hold the potential for extending the understanding of personal or individual experience to an examination of how racism operates through systems of privilege. They surface contradictions that exist in our lived experiences and attest to both the history of racial discrimination as well as the ongoing existence of racism. In doing so they also provide an opportunity to question the status quo and privilege that underlies the majoritarian stories when juxtaposed with the counter stories.

Of what pedagogic value, then, are counter-stories for challenging racist, sexist, homophobic, classist and other dominant narratives? Because counter-narratives are grounded in racial knowledge, crossing the epistemological boundary is both premise and objective for the counter narrative. However, for adult educators engaged in anti-racist work, this question has practical import given the claims made on behalf of counter-narratives within a CRT framework. The power of stories is great at an individual level. However, we hypothesize that unless narratives can connect the individual with institutional or societal levels of knowing (Scheurich and Young, 2004), their transformative power will be limited. Adult educators need to carefully manage dialogues in which counter-stories are told to ensure that they are not simply considered aberrations within an otherwise just social order and thereby viewed as interesting but marginalized discourses. An analysis of counter stories that reflect divergent world views and situations may lead to a more grounded way to discuss the racial tensions that still exist in our society and offer one way to understand how individual experiences reflect broader social patterns (Bell, 2003). It is our hope that with continued commitment and courage we will someday be able to tell and share stories that value all of our experiences and reflect a society that embraces equity, justice, and true inclusiveness.

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