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Perpetuating Racism in the Field of Adult Education: A Process of Liberation for White European Decent Professors

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Abstract: The purpose of this case study research was to identify attitudes and analyze the behaviors of white European descent members of the adult education professoriate to determine how and in what ways they perpetuate racism. This research may change the way white European descent adult educators interact with colleagues and students of color.

Introduction

We live in a social system in the United States where one group is privileged over all others. Privilege blinds the majority to the way privilege advantages them over others. Covert and overt racism are realities in the United States (Dovidio & Gaertner, 1998), just as in adult education graduate programs and organizations. Adult education prides itself on being sensitive to racial communities; inclusive teaching, hegemony, oppression, racialization, and cultures; these topics are frequently written about and discussed at AERC.

Some who write about diversity have offered recommendations for creating a more inclusive environment for learners. Alfred (2002) hoped there would be space for the many views represented and offered by learners. She emphasized the “importance of critical self-awareness and development of cultural competency in building a more inclusive adult education” (p. 89). She believed that educators must initiate change within themselves before change could inform their practice.

Clark and O’Donnell (1999) stated what they believed to be the first step in combating racism: “A refocusing of the discussion of racism onto its perpetrators” (p. 9). Faculty and students of color continue to be negatively impacted by those practicing professionals who are not aware of their racist attitudes and behaviors. The white majority in education often do not acknowledge racism (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2002). The difficulty for white European descent professors lies in a lack of awareness and not wanting to admit culpability; they do not want to be seen in a negative light. Critical reflection on attitudes and behaviors are a beginning to becoming more self-aware. Practicing professionals who are not aware of their racist attitudes and behaviors continue to harm faculty and students of color. White European decent professors seldom discuss how they perpetuate racism in the professional organizations and practice.

This research is not about the oppressed but about the oppressor; it is about how racism is perpetuated by the dominant culture. It is about the people of white European descent taking responsibility for the role they have in perpetuating racism. The term peoples of color will be used instead of people of color to acknowledge the many rich, independent cultural communities residing and contributing to society in the United States and not just one homogenized group. The term people of white European descent will be used to ensure acknowledgement that members of the dominant culture are a racial community.

Purpose of the Research

The purpose of this research study was to identify attitudes and analyze the behaviors of white European decent members of the adult education professoriate to determine how and in

what ways racism is perpetuated in the profession and practice of adult education. Attitudes and behaviors were examined as they related to inclusion of peoples of color in professional organizations, curriculum, and praxis. The discourse in the field of adult education regarding the attitudes and behaviors contributing to racism, and the impact of racism on students and colleagues was particularly relevant to this research. The questions guiding the research were: 1) How and in what ways are the attitudes and behaviors in the field of adult education associated with the perpetuation of racism?; 2) In what manner or ways do people of white European descent in the adult education professoriate perpetuate racism?

Significance of the Research

The significance of this research resides with the adult education professors of white European descent and adult education institutions. Change has been slow in the field of race relations primarily because of the reluctance to deal with “the structural aspects of racism in American society, and, on the other, by a persistently wrongheaded conceptualization of racism as a ‘minority problem’” (Bowser & Hunt, 1981, p. 19). There has been broad research done on the impact of racism in higher education on marginalized groups; however, research is limited on those who perpetuate racism. From research we have seen how this exclusion and pressure to conform impacts the profession and research scholars. Hayes and Colin (1994) stated that the answer to being inclusive was confronting racism:

If we wish our educational programs and professional interactions to be truly inclusive and if we wish to educate others to work equitably and effectively with the members of diverse populations, we must confront and challenge racist and sexist assumptions (p. 1).

Professors of white European descent will have an increased awareness of their role in perpetuating racism. It will provide a mirror for professors in looking at what attitudes and behaviors currently perpetuate racism in the field. Professors will be able to ascertain where they need additional information and developmental growth. Adult education institutions will have information about policies and practices that negatively impact peoples of color.

Theoretical Framework

The basis for this research resided in the synthesis of critical theory and the philosophy of liberation (Kellner, 2004; Dussel, 1976). Both described forces of domination and tactics for liberation. An examination of racism within the adult education professoriate using only critical theory focuses on liberation from oppression using only an ethnocentric lens, a micro focus, while the philosophy of liberation provides a macro focus on systems of world domination. As articulated by Kellner (2004) synthesizing critical theory and the philosophy of liberation allows for the cause of liberation in both the dominate and the marginalized; articulating differences and exploring commonalities

Critical theory and philosophy of liberation are similar as both are materialist, critical, and emancipatory theories, which attack Western philosophy as part of domination (Kellner, 2004). Both criticize mainstream philosophy and social theory and offer alternatives to established thoughts and discourse. Both address domination and liberation from different perspectives. Philosophy of liberation allows the oppressed to know that their domination serves the interests of the oppressors. They gain critical perspectives of the majority and know the oppressors ideology; this same knowledge is not accessible to the majority. The dominant culture cannot understand oppression and material deprivation (Kellner, 2004; Dussel, 1976).

Critical theory can help identify the legacy and current social ill of racism while philosophy of liberation can encourage educators to join the oppressed in their struggle for

liberation. It is only then that white European decent professors can become allies, support, and defend those in the struggle. Contrary to critical theory, it is not about emancipation—setting anyone free or liberating someone else, it is about seeking liberation for oneself by understanding how one oppresses—it is about becoming nonracist.

Research Design

This qualitative research allowed for an understanding of how people interpret their experiences, how they made meaning of their experiences, and how they decided which actions were appropriate in situations. It is an approach to research that fosters understanding of behavior from the frame of reference of the participant (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). This holistic approach to research assisted in the understanding of how racism is perpetuated personally and professionally in the field of adult education.

Case study was selected to describe and analyze the phenomenon of racism in the field of adult education. The responsibilities Stake (2000) outlined as the major conceptual responsibilities of the case researcher were used: bounding the case; selecting phenomena; seeking patterns; triangulating key observations; selecting alternative interpretations; and developing assertions.

Twenty-three white European descent, tenure track, adult education faculty members were invited to participate in the study. Although 15 agreed to participate, only 10 interviews actually took place. Participants were born in the United States, published in the field of adult education, and were located in various parts of the country. Personal, in-depth interviews were conducted to discover, understand, and gain insight into racism. Interview responses and field notes were analyzed determine attitudes and behaviors perpetuating racism in the field of adult education.

Selected Findings

The findings included two major areas: attitudes perpetuating racism and behaviors perpetuating racism. From the first area of inquiry, the following attitudes emerged: superiority of professors of white European descent, deficiency of peoples of color, and avoidance in taking responsibility for addressing racism. The second area of inquiry revealed the behaviors perpetuating racism in adult education institutions; support for colleagues of color, admission requirements, and practice.

Attitudes Perpetuating Racism

Superiority of Professors of White European Descent. In the discussion of how racism is perpetuated by white European descent professors, the superiority of professors of white European descent—in their patronizing attitudes, ignorance of the deprivations, and use of stereotypes emerged. Comments were also made about the deficiency of peoples of color. Professors of white European descent avoided the responsibility of addressing or educating themselves regarding racism.

During the interviews White European descent professors referenced some of the stereotypes they perceived of peoples of color: African Americans did not have the means to finance the arts and foreign languages; they did not support one another in receiving aid or getting something without hard work; the term hybrid was used to describe interracial marriages resulting in bi- or tri-racial people—people unable to define themselves. One participant felt the color of their skin had everything to do with how someone interacted with them.

Deficiency of Peoples of Color. In contrast to the feeling of superiority of white European Americans, there was a feeling that all peoples of color are deficient in comparison to the standards set by the majority. The deficiency was noticed in their academic preparation and writing abilities, specifically African Americans. The inability of students of color to complete dissertations caused problems for professors who struggled to prepare students of color to write academically. It was clear African Americans were perceived to have good oral skills but generally had poor writing skills.

The inability of African Americans was discussed in relation to how they presented and defended their research; were passed along in graduate programs; and received more attention because society continues to feel guilty about slavery. Some of the attitudes revealed were: recent immigrants are able to integrate into our society more easily; African American women didn't know how to support their children in school; and no matter how society has tried to change the status of African Americans, only a few have been successful.

Avoidance of Responsibility for Addressing Racism. White European American descent people avoid taking action against racism and take advantage of the benefits of a white racist society. Faculty members of color are relied upon to address racism although it was difficult to find qualified faculty members of color to address different perspectives and experiences. Justification was made for not addressing racism: excuses were made for faculty members and students of white European descent in racially charged situations; racism was not addressed because of the lack of research regarding race; and African Americans might not view addressing racism positively. There was a denial or minimization of how little things have changed for peoples of color in very basic ways: unfair racial allegations; sexism was more of a concern than racism; and racism is not a problem anymore. Participants equated racism to being a minority white person in a white community and being of a different faith than the majority. Blaming the victims of racism was prevalent in dealing with racism, making them feel helpless, forcing them to act where they would not have to do the same with a white professor, being singled out unfairly by peoples of color, peoples of color asserting themselves too much regarding oppression, and the concern over having to be politically correct.

Behaviors Perpetuating Racism

The adult education faculty of color's experience was discussed as it related to their need for support, the complaints and lack of respect they commonly receive from students, and how they are overextended in their time commitments—recruit, advise, and support the students of color. It is difficult for faculty of color to stand for promotion and tenure as the process may be biased against them. They may not understand the rules and may be questioned about their documentation and research agenda—too narrow when it is on their own cultural community. The methodology they use was viewed as substandard; traditional research would be too difficult.

In most cases students of color were required to take the Graduate Records Examination (GRE) as part of the admission process; there was general acknowledgement that it did not predict the success of students of color, it acted as a barrier. Most faculty members worked around this requirement; however, no one discussed trying to change the requirement. Admitting students of color to graduate programs involved holding students of color to a higher standard and admitting fewer or holding them to lower standards and graduating them with fewer skills.

Participants had differing experiences with race in their practices: racial issues were not noticed and yet a number of racially charged examples were given. The competence of students of color was mentioned a number of times: students of color were not given appropriate credit or

grades for the work they did—a faculty member had not given an African American an “A” in 30 years. Participants thought students of color had to struggle more than others and giving critical feedback to students of color was difficult.

Conclusions

The scope of this research was extensive; professors of white European descent were candid and forthright in their examination of racism in the field of adult education. One of the most damaging attitudes is faculty and students of color, primarily African Americans, are not intellectually prepared or capable of teaching or completing graduate work. The learning environment remains safe for white European descent students and faculty and remains hostile for students of color. Faculty are modeling that it is okay to not address racism or be racist in the classroom. A residual effect is that students will not respect faculty of color in the classroom.

This research found practicing adult education professionals intellectually aware of racism as wrong, bad, and a significant issue. When queried about their involvement in the discourse, a number of them had been involved a number of years ago when things were tense, either voluntarily or involuntarily at meetings.

The examples given by participants and the language they used included primarily African American professors or students, directly linking African Americans or Blacks with racism. Even when other races were mentioned, they were mentioned in contrast to African Americans. This research reinforced that in adult education, racism remains a black and white issue. Until white European descent professors come to terms with the racism perpetuated against African Americans, it will be very difficult to deal with racism involving other races.

The dialogue in adult education has not embraced the topic of racism in professional organizations or institutionally. White European faculty members do not share their concerns or struggles with race in the field of adult education. It remains something they are ashamed to admit or they do not know what to do. If it is not talked about, it remains removed from them, although everyone is intimately involved in racism on a daily basis.

Recommendations

This research examined racism from the perspective of the oppressor, a different approach from other research done in education. Asante (1998) said this about different perspectives: “Accounting for different perspectives or allowing them to emerge becomes the principal aim of a truly liberating perspective” (p. 17). It is critical that adult education professors of white European descent: acknowledge racism is systemic and institutionalized in the United States and in adult education; understand they have been socialized to be racist; critically reflect on their past interactions with peoples of color and their current practice; discuss and dialogue with colleagues and those who will support their journey; admit they are racist—action cannot occur when a person is in denial; believe it is possible to become nonracist; have the moral courage to combat racism on a daily basis. Some of these recommendations are similar to Preciphs’ components for changing perceptions (as cited in Colin & Preciphs, 1991). “The education of one’s heart and soul also requires moving beyond immediate emotional responses. Transformation requires being or becoming aware of the general powers of injustice and finding the thread common to all humanity” (Hart, 2001, p. 179).

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