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Synoptic Judgment: Constructing Cross Racial Dialogues in a Post Racial Society

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Abstract:

Synoptic judgment, understood as the act of seeing diverse perspectives, is presented as pedagogically useful to analyze and interpret racialized narrative in order to reveal and challenge racial injustice. Implications for classroom practice are offered as a means to assist adult educators and learners to meaningfully learn across racial boundaries while acknowledging the way in which power and privilege shape epistemology.

Introduction

In the wake of the election of Barack Obama, the first African American president of the United States of America, and a turn toward a transcendent ideology of race, some proclaimed that America was ushered into a post-racial era - an era when race is insignificant as a signifier and neither racial difference nor race matters as an important social category (e.g., Lum, 2005; McWhorter, 2005). There are two important consequences to post-racialism. On the one hand, racialized discourses (Brookfield, 2003) are suppressed and marginalized in favor of a colorblind discourse. On the other hand, race as a central aspect of identity that is rooted in a cultural, social, and political history is minimized even though racism continues to frame the everyday interactions of people and circumscribes lived realities of brown and black people as evidenced by the face of poverty, crime, and under education. To avoid the continued marginalization of such discourses, race must be recognized, synoptic judgment (seeing together) (Polkinghorne, 1988) must be employed, and dialogue must be re-constructed.

Counter narratives

Critical race theory in general has been used over the last decade within education to sensitize educators, researchers, and learners to the toxic ways that race continues to operate in American society and to explicate how the commonplace claims of neutrality, objectivity, meritocracy, and colorblindness serve to camouflage the self-interest of the powerful groups in society. These commonplace claims also limit the meaningful participation and attainment of persons of color and most definitely hinder effective dialogues on race and racism in educational settings. Counter storytelling is one of the primary tools used by critical race scholars and educators to challenge race neutral discourse and expose how white privilege operates to reinforce and support unequal racial relations in our society.

Counter narratives work to historicize and contextualize people's understandings of race and racism and how they function in our society. Counter narratives can be used to examine how race differently affects individuals' lives according to how those individuals are positioned within the unequal power relations within our society. Counter narratives are filtered through the sieve of majoritarian stories that reflect and reproduce social relations and must be understood in the context of the wider set of social relations in which they are embedded (Bell, 2003).

Bell (2010) has recently expanded the concept of counter storytelling by identifying four story types: Stock stories/majoritarian stories, and three types of counter stories - concealed, resistance, and emerging/transforming. She also provides examples for how a critical analysis of

those stories can be used to help learners overcome some of the barriers that emerge when discussions of race occur. Counter stories are used as pedagogical tools to help people learn about systemic racism, understand its manifestations in their own lives, and take action to challenge racism and white supremacy (Bell, 2010). The model of a consciously created storytelling community that is mindful of the often subtle ways that positionality creates risk, is intentional about the connections between individual stories and groups' experiences with racism, and centers the analysis of those experiences has application to the classrooms that adult educators encounter every day.

Privilege and positionality

Positionality refers to the hierarchical positioning of persons vis a vis other persons based on their respective markers of identity which are multiple and overlapping. Positionality is fluid, complex, and dynamic and thus is always influenced by changes in society and time (Kezar, 2000). The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* states that "Society labels people according to racial categories, and . . . such labeling often leads to race-based differences in resources, opportunities, and well-being" (James, 2011). Because those differences impact one's positioning in society, adult educators should have an awareness of racial categories that includes an understanding of both positionality and the accompanying set of privileges - unearned benefits conferred to one group at the expense of other groups - and disadvantages that accompany racialized identity. According to Goodman (2011) the privileged group sets "the social norms. Its values, images, and experiences" (p. 5) become the standard. Consequently, the privilege group understands its experiences as normative and lacks awareness of its situated dominance, its privilege, and its exercise of power and oppression.

There is a relational quality to positionality that results in "power over" imposed by the privilege group which subsequently circumscribes racial identity. Hence, positionality theory correctly denotes that "power conditions do not simply shape people, people shape power conditions and the resultant relations" (Kezar, 2000, p. 727). Those power conditions shape the relationships between students and between the faculty and students as well as the knowledge production and the faculty and students also shape the power conditions. Positionality Theory appreciates that people must have explicit understandings of their position in society in order to recognize the ways in which power insidiously operates in their relationships and in their construction of knowledge. However the privileged group often lacks the capacity to understand narratives which exist outside of its own experiences. Because of this, it is necessary to explicitly connect "positionality to epistemology" because this "simultaneously empowers and disempowers individual expertise in the classroom" (Takacs, 2003, p. 29). This redistributes the power within the classroom and reshapes the power conditions which operate in the classroom allowing majoritarian stories and counter narratives to be heard in a different timbre.

Synoptic judgment

Positionality and privilege frame racial dialogue which is grounded in racialized narratives. These narratives are embedded in relations of power. Racialized narratives are constituted in and through socio-historical developments that strongly influence how racial narratives are interpreted by persons from different social positions. A historical example will serve to illustrate this point. Many Americans celebrate the Fourth of July as Independence Day in the United States to commemorate the Declaration of Independence from England. And yet, Frederick Douglass' classic treatise entitled "What Does your Fourth of July Mean for the Negro?" offered

a radically different view grounded in very different lived experiences and social locations than American whites. It can be seen that racial position becomes central to how meaning is constructed differently by persons of different racial identities.

“Narrative explanation”, says Polkinghorne (1988), “involves a special kind of understanding which converts congeries of events into concatenations, and emphasizes and increases the scope of synoptic judgment in our reflection on experience” (p. 22). Synoptic, whose Greek root means to ‘see together’, judgment is that quality in reflection that allows one to appropriate meaning grounded in a different cultural frame as part of one's own cultural frame. Some narrative features, e.g., facts, become less important than the functions of narrative that produce strong emotional response. Synoptic judgment is connected to the capacity of narrative to reorganize events from ‘congeries’, or random events, into concatenations. Counter stories aid the development of synoptic judgment through their ability to organize changing events into sensible, meaningful events.. The development of synoptic judgment may increase the ability to mediate cross-racial dialogues that are sensitive to and that honor intercultural experiences.

Power, Voice and Narrative: Conceptualizing the Connections

The multi-dimensional quality of narrative is characterized by the layered connections between the personal, the cultural, and the structural. Racial narratives are constituted in relations of power. As Takacs (2003) and others persuasively argue, who you are (racial identity) shapes how individuals see the world. Racial knowledge is tied to racialized structures. How one is positioned in that structure shapes experience and the meaning tied to that experience. This means that “meaning”, which is what narrative ‘creates’ is shaped by power relations tied to structural hierarchies. Because narrative is a preferred way that human beings communicate and thereby create meaning about experience, Johnson-Bailey (2004) says that narratives “portray the element of individual knowing and awareness, making them ideal as bridges across the personal barriers of the mind and the political alliances of the conscience” (p. 126). We argue that there is potential for developing synoptic (i.e., ‘seeing together’) understandings of human experience across racial boundaries. Effectively, narratives hold the potential to create synoptic judgment. One of the ways that Bell and her colleagues do this is by talking about risk-supportive environments and asking students to create the rules by which they will operate. The goal is to have dialogues in which respect is communicated even while learners are encouraged to take risks (2010). In explaining the ground rules, or terms of engagement, Bell emphasizes the challenge of recognizing, confronting, and understanding inequality given the different social positions held by members of the group (Bell, 2010). Developing and holding each other accountable to the guidelines coupled with the understanding that stories will be held up and scrutinized in terms of their relationship to power and privilege can be pedagogically valuable in producing deeper awareness and analysis of racialized systems (Bell, 2010).

How can counter narratives be used to further the engagement of meaningful dialogue and help us get past the divisions that exist based on our positionality? What are the challenges or barriers we as educators face when we move to use them in the classroom to facilitate awareness of injustice and how we can more fully build a democratic, inclusive community? To answer these, we must first speak to some of the challenges as we design a framework to move us forward. One of the primary challenges we face is the resistance by members of the dominant culture to hearing and understanding the stories of others who are not positioned within the dominant culture. Indeed one of the primary purposes of stock stories is to conceal the underlying assumptions regarding inequality and shore up the very naturalness of the position of the

privileged. As Bell (2010) and her colleagues have found, the building of a community of learners who agree to hold the stories up to analysis and hold each other accountable for taking risks yet dialoguing in a respectful manner can give members of the privileged positions an opportunity to get access to what Anzaldua (1990) calls “racial blank spots” – the selective editing of reality that allows white people to disengage from the advantages they enjoy and not think about how they got them.

In Bell’s (2010) work the juxtaposition of stock and concealed stories can explicate some of the underlying assumptions related to power and privilege that are embedded in stock stories, such as neutrality, objectivity, meritocracy, and colorblindness. Thinking about both stock and concealed stories in light of the extensive data on the racial distribution of life opportunities and access to educational and other resources can sometimes lead learners, especially those in the dominant cultures to think about racial inequality in new ways. Similarly, an examination of counter narratives, which often eludes persons in the dominant culture, contradicts or undermines majoritarian narratives ultimately making possible the “seeing together” implied in synoptic judgment.

Racialized Narratives in Classroom Practice

How can adult educators use counter narrative stories to engender cross racial dialogues through the development of synoptic judgment and help us get past the divisions that can exist based on our positionality? What are the challenges or barriers we as educators face when we use narratives in the classroom to facilitate the awareness of injustice and work to build a more democratic, inclusive community? One of the important prerequisites to using stories to uncover, challenge, and reconstruct a more democratic awareness is how to create the conditions under which meaningful discussions can occur. Chapman (2004) reminds us that narratives and the analysis that follows can become discourses about individualism or heroics thus further reinscribing the status quo. Failing to uncover the assumptions embedded in unequal relations and discourses of power privileges those who are already privileged. It is important to monitor who gets to speak and how to set up the conditions necessary for dialogue to occur (Bell, 2010). Not all stories are equally acknowledged, valued, or even heard.

Cross-racial dialogues can be difficult for students and for the adult educator. Being aware of the ways that privilege and positionality influence narratives and the ability to employ synoptic judgment is key to enabling more effective cross-racial dialogues. Practically, facilitators need to remember three important elements: time, respect, and understanding. Good stories often take time to tell - the context must be set, the characters must be described, and the plot must be developed. This is particularly the case for stories centered on race and racism. In order for others to be in the best position to appreciate the story, the narrators must detail who they are in terms of their privilege and positionality, and adult educators must build the capacity for the acknowledgement and understanding of the challenges of recognizing and confronting inequality from the different social positions held by members of the group (Bell, 2010). Educators must leave space for dialogue and be flexible. It can be counter-productive to rigidly adhere to pre-planned activities by cutting off learners who attempt to tell their stories.

Allowing time for the development of the narrative also shows respect for the experiences being communicated. Because learners tend to take their cues from the facilitator, adult educators should model pedagogically effective behavior. For instance, if the adult educator interrupts a learner’s narrative, effectively silencing her, in a rush to move to the next topic to be covered; or if the adult educator permits another learner to interrupt, ask a question, or state an opinion before

the learner narrator has had an opportunity to finish, the other learners may delimit the importance of what is being said. In effect, the facilitator has failed to honor the voice of the story-teller thereby allowing racialized hierarchy to remain unexamined and unchallenged. Recognizing the gravity of the moment for the narrator models respect and demonstrates to the class how to embrace cross-racial dialogues. Educators who acknowledge both stock and counter stories with their emotional and cognitive dimensions are better positioned to connect the story to theory and ultimately to praxis. Remaining critically self-reflective before, during, and after sessions that involve cross-racial dialogue can be difficult to achieve. Journaling, developing a personal feelings audit, and talking with colleagues in cross-racial contexts are ways that facilitators can begin the process of “seeing together” with their students and developing a praxis that encourages students to “see together” with each other.

Time, respect, and understanding are also important for navigating another challenge we as educators face when achieving meaningful cross-racial dialogues: the resistance by many members of the dominant culture to hearing and understanding the stories of those who are not as privileged. It takes time to build a community of learners who agree to hold the stories they tell up to an analysis that challenges the assumptions related to inequality and the naturalness of the privileged position. And it takes respect and understanding to hold each other accountable for taking risks yet dialoguing in a respectful manner (Bell, 2010).

In short, racial boundaries represented in apparent individual differences in experience and knowledge in fact are porous. Because of the complex, multi-dimensional nature of narratives, i.e. the layering of the connections between the personal, the socio-cultural, and the position of the knower, narratives and their conscious analysis have the potential to lead to a more engaged, embodied knowing. Transformative stories can be co-created – making possible the “seeing together” implied in synoptic judgment and a renewed focus not just on differences and commonalities but also in challenging and undermining racial injustice.

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