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Applying Critical Reflection to Teaching Race and Racism

Uncovering assumptions about race and racism is one of the hardest critically reflective projects, particularly for white teachers unused to seeing themselves as racial beings. In my own work I find it very difficult to detect the ways racism lives within me and how racist instincts and intuitions manifest themselves in what I assume are seemingly benign behaviors. I also find it incredibly hard to lead conversations designed to uncover racism. I feel it's my responsibility to do this but I know these conversations will invariably be tense, fraught, and leave people very unsettled. Pain, anger, and frustration will inevitably be expressed and most participants will conclude that we've ended up at what feels like an unsatisfactory point of nonresolution. Furthermore, people of different racial identities often feel that others in the group "just don't get it" and that authentic communication across racial differences is impossible. Over the years I've had many people tell me that the one thing they've learned from starting a discussion of race is never to initiate such a discussion again.

Why Is Critical Reflection on Race and Racism So Difficult?

There are several reasons why applying the four lenses of critically reflective practice to issues of race and racism is so problematic. Some of these have to do with the general nature of critical

reflection that requires that we consider perspectives we sometimes find alien and disturbing. Others have to do with the particularities of the topic. Race and racism are hard to talk about in any way and at any level. A whole new level of critical complexity emerges when we start to unearth and challenge assumptions about race that we've lived by and acted on for many years. This is particularly so for whites who consider themselves "good white people" (Sullivan, 2014) opposing racism.

The Problem of Perspective Taking

The attempt to try to understand the world as someone else experiences it is what Mezirow (1991) labels as the process of perspective taking. He argues that it requires empathy, the ability to bracket beliefs, and a critical curiosity exercised in the asking of revealing questions concerning someone else's experience. Getting yourself out of a familiar perspective and looking at an event or experience in a fundamentally different way is an enormously complex task. It requires you to suspend temporarily all the instincts, frames of reference, and interpretive filters that you trust to guide you as you make sense of the things you see around you.

One of the biggest problems in fostering critical conversation on race is struggling to see the world through a fundamentally different racial lens. As mentioned previously, students and colleagues of color have often told me that they see *everything* through the lens of race. To whites such as myself, many of whom think of race as something that comes up only occasionally in specific situations, this is a very hard reality to appreciate.

When perspective taking about race is concerned there's also the fact that the experiences you're striving to understand and take seriously are often ones that you find unthinkable. For most whites being told that they live in a racist world where their unearned power and privilege causes them to perpetuate an unjust system is, quite literally, inconceivable. They can't imagine that this might actually be the truth. Furthermore, this unimaginable truth is one

that sometimes implicates them in maintaining a racist system, something they'd much prefer not to contemplate.

The Ideology of White Supremacy

A second difficulty is connected to the ingrained ideology of white supremacy. This ideology holds that whiteness is the natural order of things. Leaders look white, people in positions of power and authority look white, and the knowledge we take most seriously in life is produced by whites. This ideology holds that what are assumed to be the normal ways of communicating along with what counts as legitimate speech and artistic forms are all defined by whites.

White supremacy is *not* going around thinking of oneself as an Aryan super being. It's more of an ingrained, unexamined understanding that the experts and leaders we take most seriously look white. White supremacy is experienced as a momentary register of shock when a black pilot enters the cockpit of your airplane, a Pakistani female surgeon enters the OR to conduct your surgery, or the president of the United States is black. The momentary disconnect whites feel in these instances reflects a deep-seated and ingrained belief that authority, legitimacy, and leadership naturally look white.

Defining Racist and Racism

A third difficulty is the severe discomfort produced by thinking of oneself as racist or complicit in racism. Part of this has to do with how racist and racism are defined. In general parlance people call each other racists to signify that they're ignorant bigots. So when the term is introduced into a critically reflective conversation people quickly jump to assume that they're being told that they're fundamentally bad and immoral creatures who deliberately cause harm to others based only on their skin color and phenotype. No one wants to hear himself or herself described that way so analysis and conversation often explode or freeze when the term *racism* is introduced.

This is why it's crucial early on that the leader or facilitator explain that the terms *racist* and *racism* are used to describe systems and structures that teach and reproduce beliefs and behaviors designed to keep a racially exclusive system intact. By this definition a racist is someone who has learned these beliefs and behaviors while being immersed, without realizing it, in the ideology of white supremacy. Racism thus becomes a way of thinking and behaving that we learn every day without being aware that this process of informal education and socialization is happening. Once racism is understood as an all-pervasive ideology that's systemically disseminated then people find it easier to see how they're affected by it. Viewed this way it would be strange for someone *not* to have assimilated elements of racist ideology because we breathe and drink it in every day of our lives.

The Slippery Nature of Racial Microaggressions

Another difficulty is that ever since the civil rights movement brought in legal reforms banning overt discrimination, and in an era that many people describe as post-racial (largely owing to the election of a black president), identifying exactly what counts as racist behavior has become more complex. Overtly racial slurs, policies, and actions are still plenty in evidence as the Black Lives Matter movement attests. However, as critical race theory (Delgado and Stefancic, 2012; Stefancic and Delgado, 2013) points out, legal changes mean that racism these days is also expressed in covert ways. When confronted with evidence of racist ideas or practices whites will retreat to a position of aversive racism (Pearson, Dovidio, and Gaertner, 2009), strenuously denying any racist intent in their behaviors.

One of the most frequent contemporary expressions of racism is in racial microaggressions (Sue, 2010), that is, small apparently matter-of-fact behaviors that are experienced as exclusionary or diminishing by people of color. Examples would be patterns of eye contact in meetings that favor whites, making stereotyping jokes

and asides that go unchallenged and are assumed to be benign, and overlooking unequal patterns of contribution in a racially mixed group. When challenged on their commission of these microaggressions whites will typically band together to convince the person of color that he or she is imagining things and that the white involved is a good person and had no idea that he or she was excluding or marginalizing someone.

I can't tell you the number of times when I've heard whites say of themselves or of colleagues that they "don't have a racist bone in their body" when a racial microaggression is pointed out. This "racist bone in their body" denial supports the mistakenly essentialist approach to defining racism. From an essentialist perspective you're either born racist or not, either a bad person full of racist bigotry or a good antiracist working for harmony. This essentialist approach completely elides the analysis of racism as a structural, systemic phenomenon, a set of institutional practices that maintains the dominance of white supremacy.

Racism comprises a set of values and beliefs that are learned and assimilated over a lifetime and that cohere into a framing perspective on the world. Racist perspectives and assumptions are paradigmatic; they structure how we look at life. When they're uncovered and challenged our world is shot to pieces and our notion of us as good, moral people crumbles (Sullivan, 2014).

Because I don't go around using the *n* word and making crude racial jokes I can convince myself I've escaped racial conditioning. But faced with the reality that I may be committing racial microaggressions it's much harder for me to think of racism as something that hasn't touched me. As long as I can conceive of racism as a big overt thing out there in the world outside me, I don't need to think about my small acts of racist invalidation. However, once I think of racism as an ideology that is learned and reinforced every day and that manifests itself in the micropolitics of daily interactions, it's much harder for me to pretend that it's something I've escaped.

The Inability of Whites to See Themselves as Racial Beings

Finally, critical reflection on race is difficult for whites who don't see themselves as racial beings or having any kind of racial identity. The way that the white discourse of racism and diversity is structured typically casts racism as a problem only for those on the receiving end. Because racism is thought of as something that people of color experience, the burden of confronting it is unthinkingly placed on their shoulders. But racism is just as much a problem of white Euro-Americans. After all, people like me are experts on enacting racism. Over my life I've assimilated racist frameworks, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors very successfully. For many years I accepted unquestioningly that encountering racism was the province of people of color and that meant that I was somehow above the fray. I was not a raced being; I was white! It was *other* people who exhibited race.

If you're white and don't see yourself as having a racial identity it's very easy to think that focusing on issues of race is something that doesn't really apply to you. You can say to yourself that of course you condemn racism, that you're not racist, and that seems to be the end of the matter. To be asked, "what does it mean to be white?" is to contemplate something you've never thought about before in your life. If you've moved through life thinking that you are the norm (which is a central element in the ideology of white supremacy) and that racism is a problem of others who don't share your skin color or phenotype, then it's extremely difficult to start thinking of yourself as a racial being.

Using Narrative Disclosure to Set a Tone for Examining Race

Given the outlined difficulties it's daunting to think about how we might become more critically reflective about examining our own racism and helping others do the same. However, the lens of personal experience offers a useful starting point. Time and again

when I've been working with colleagues, students, and communities of color I've heard the same message: "we don't need you to find out about *us*—we need you to find out about *you*." In other words, they'd like me and other whites to consider what it means to be white, what are the elements of a distinctly white identity, and how that identity confers unearned power and privilege.

This is why any attempt to get people talking about race and racism really needs a hefty amount of initial self-disclosure by the leader. As a participant in diversity and antiracist professional development workshops over the years this dynamic is often noticeably absent. Instead the workshop is set up to help participants learn about cultural and racial difference and to help them be more alert to the ways they fall into reproducing racist behaviors by perpetuating cultural stereotypes and holding inaccurate assumptions about different racial groups. The underlying assumption is that through education and self-reflection people can learn to work in ways free of racist undertones. In this approach antiracist and diversity education is something done to you by those who have cracked the code of cultural misunderstanding and who have come out the other side of struggling with racism to a point where they can now teach others how to think and work in non-racist ways.

What's often missing from this approach is an explicit examination of personal experience by those in charge. A narrative disclosure of how the leader or facilitators have striven to uncover their own racial assumptions and how they've tried to open themselves up to new and troubling perspectives is a necessary precondition for good conversation about race. It's absolutely crucial for white teachers engaged in this work to talk about the ways they learned racism and the way it still lives within them. I know that in my own case I'll never lose the racist instincts and intuitions I've learned; white supremacy has successfully inscribed itself way too deeply within me for that to happen. To the extent that I constantly commit microaggressions, remain blind to others' microaggressions, and still see students and colleagues of color as the exotic

or threatening "other," I will always be racist. However, I can strive to be aware of these things as best I can, to watch out for them, and push back against them.

When I'm in charge of a class, workshop, training, or meetings in which uncovering racism is the declared purpose I usually begin by disclosing my own racial history. As with most whites of my generation in Britain, I grew up in a world in which whiteness, and all things white, was taken as the "natural" order of things. I adopted, without ever thinking about it, what Yancy calls a *white gaze* (2008, 2012), that is, a view of blackness that interpreted every black action and statement through a lens confirming my supposed superiority as a white person.

I've had six decades of ideological conditioning into white supremacy and, as a result, I don't expect it ever to leave me. It's very clear that, far from having no racist bone in my body, my skeletal framework has racism as its bone marrow. I learned stereotypes and bias through jokes with peers, family conversations, and media images that flourished in the vacuum of no contact with anyone other than whites like myself. I don't think I had a conversation with a black person until I was eighteen years old. This ideology of white supremacy rarely named itself as such. Overt declarations of white racial superiority were rare and, even as racist attitudes were being learned, I was engaged in apparently antiracist acts. For example, as an undergraduate I participated in demonstrations against the South African rugby team that represented the then-apartheid regime. But external behavior often masks learned instincts, and so it was with me.

External events sometimes challenged the power of this ideology. One pivotal event in adolescence helped disrupt the way white supremacy moved in me. This happened at the age of seventeen when I was being beaten up by a gang of white youths (they were "rockers"; I was a "mod") in an English town one Friday night. A black American serviceman from a nearby USAF base crossed

the street and broke up the fight telling us "everybody's got to be cool now." In my memory I was on the verge of falling to the floor as the GI intervened to save me from potentially severe injury.

Being born in Bootle (Liverpool) I knew that once you were on the floor things got a lot worse because then people could kick you in the ribs, kidneys, and head. That event formed what critical race theory calls a counter-story that disrupted the white supremacist script forming in my head. The supremacist script said that black people are violent and start fights and white people are peacemakers who sometimes have to use force to reign in black instigators of violence. Here was a stunning role reversal that made a big impression on me. Whites had initiated the violence, and a black person had stopped it!

As well as talking about their own learned racism, teachers, leaders, and facilitators can begin classes, meetings, or workshops by disclosing their own recent enactments of microaggressions. When I want to introduce this concept to a group I typically begin by conducting a public analysis of my own recent racial and gender microaggressions. One example I've often used happened in an academic class on leadership in which I asked all the students in a discussion to give their preliminary take on an issue we were examining that day. After hearing from each student I summarized what I felt were the main themes and differences revealed in the discussion. On finishing my summary a white female student raised her hand and said I'd missed out hearing one member of the group, a young Asian American woman. I was momentarily flustered and apologized to the student and then invited her to speak.

During the coffee break I thought the incident over and realized it was a classic example of a microaggression. I certainly had no plans to exclude this student. I hadn't come to class thinking, "I must make certain student A doesn't have the chance to speak." So when I returned to class after the break I began the session by apologizing again and saying that what the students had just witnessed

was a classic example of a racial microaggression. A representative of the dominant culture had unknowingly and unwittingly marginalized someone from a community of color.

One of the white students told me not to be so hard on myself and said I was reading far too much into a momentary lapse of forgetfulness. I explained that microaggressions are never intended. Instead, they're ingrained, seemingly instinctive behaviors that represent years of unconscious assimilation and socialization. They're ideological in the sense that they become part of our daily repertoire, behavioral minutiae that actually represent a socially ordered system of structural inequality. At this point the student I had overlooked spoke up and said that the same thing had happened to her in every class she had taken at the university. Her experience had been that of being repeatedly ignored.

Colleagues as Critical Lenses on Race

Deeply embedded paradigmatic assumptions are almost never surfaced without the involvement of others. These assumptions are constituent of our identity in that they seem to be obviously true renditions of the world. The only way they're challenged is if some external circumstance forces them to the forefront of our consciousness. One way this often happens is when another person provides a starkly different version of reality. This idea is at the core of critical race theory's emphasis on counter storytelling (Bell, 2010; Nash and Viray, 2013). For whites to hear students or colleagues of color describe their experience of racism with all the pain and anger that involves is what theorists of transformative learning (Taylor and Cranton, 2012) call a *disorienting dilemma*. This is particularly the case if the situation being described is one in which you've participated or eerily close to one you're currently experiencing.

Optimally, a multiracial team should facilitate every discussion, meeting, workshop, or class convened to uncover racism and explore how we might talk across racial differences. It should open with team members discussing their own dynamics and the way

that their different racial identities have affected their patterns of communication and decision making.

What Students' Eyes Tell Us about Examining Race in the Classroom

Students of all racial identities often complain of race fatigue. White students say they're tired of always being asked to focus on what they regard as a nonissue or of being made to feel guilty when they had no direct hand in the racial oppression of the past. Students of color are tired of having to speak for their race and being expected to raise the racial consciousness of reluctant whites. In predominantly white institutions faculty of color also live with the institutional expectation that as well as teaching about their subject they will have essentially a full-time second job teaching their faculty colleagues about race.

But avoiding discussions of race is *not* an option. Given the changing demographics of students in higher education, issues of race will force their way into the classroom. The reality is that faculty members in every discipline will sooner or later have to deal with racial dynamics and tensions in their classrooms and departments. Also, talking about race is just the right thing to do. So what can we learn from students' experiences of participating in discussions of race? In particular, what do students tell us about the kinds of classroom climates, arrangements, and activities that help get them participating in racial discussions? In this section I want to build on twenty years of data collected from Critical Incident Questionnaires administered in multiple classroom, workshop, and community settings all focused on fostering discussion of race and racism. These provide a number of insights and guiding principles that constitute a starting point for a critical reflection on race.

We Need to Prep Students

It's clear that in students' eyes faculty members need to prepare for racial conversations by creating some ground rules that lay a foundation for what lies ahead. Students need to be made aware of the

fact that discussions will get fraught and heated. They also need to trust that they're in the hands of a capable discussion leader (about which I'll discuss more). The idea of safe spaces and brave spaces (Arao and Clemens, 2013) is a useful one to invoke as a way of getting students to focus on what's coming. People often say they want discussion of race to be in a safe space. By this they mean that no one will be pilloried for saying the wrong thing, people won't call each other names, and everyone will treat each other respectfully.

The problem is that safe spaces can also be interpreted to be spaces in which no one is made to feel uncomfortable. In racial analyses that's going to be impossible. If discussions of perceived racism reach a point at which people can stop further analysis by saying, "I just don't see it that way so we'll have to agree to disagree" then no real progress is being made. Participants need to be ready to hold differences in tension and exercise critical curiosity on the origins of this difference and the reasons why people feel so strongly that an alternate viewpoint is wrong. This is often called a *brave space*.

A brave space classroom is one in which challenges, not attacks, are present. For example, one person saying to another "you're a racist" is an attack. By contrast, saying "I hear that comment as containing an element of white supremacist ideology in the idea that whites are the natural gatekeepers of truth" is a challenge. In brave space classrooms the perspectives, theories, and arguments people would prefer to avoid are ever present. This sometimes gets emotionally draining, a reality that also needs to be acknowledged.

A colleague of mine, Lucia Pawlowski (2016), writes in her syllabus for a course on Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Language:

> Know that there will come a point in the semester for most of you (1) when you think: "I've heard ENOUGH about oppression. I am DONE." At this point, come see me or a counselor to talk it out; (2) when you want to stop reading and doing your work for this class because

> you are so emotionally exhausted from thinking about this stuff. That is to be expected; it is normal. When that happens, try to push through, and reassure yourself it's something you can overcome—and of course, let me know if I can help. The point is, this is not just an intellectual journey; it's an emotional one. You're going to have to invest your whole self in order to learn about oppression, power, and privilege.

One thing that prepares people for brave space workshops and classrooms is the presence of clear ground rules and criteria for participation. It's helpful to have clear discussion protocols that students understand are designed to stop one or two strong voices dominating. Examples of this would be the Circle of Voices exercise, the Bohmian Dialogue approach, or the Circular Response method (see Brookfield and Preskill, 2016, for descriptions of all these). All of these are introduced to participants as ways to democratize participation and create alternate conversational rhythms. Others such as Chalk Talk or TodaysMeet build on visual modes of communication and are done silently.

Modeling by Leaders Is Crucial

Students and colleagues also say that they appreciate it when leaders begin an examination of race by first modeling their own participation in any of the risk-full activities they plan for the class or workshop. Not only does this modeling provide clear examples of what brave space behaviors look like but also it earns teachers and facilitators the right to ask students and colleagues to begin this difficult work. If you show you take a task seriously enough to do it yourself in front of students you're on much stronger moral ground when it comes to asking them to conduct the same activity.

So, for example, if I'm going to ask people to recall microaggressions they've enacted I need to do this first in front of everyone by listing some of my most recent transgressions. If I believe in

the importance of racial perspective taking then I need to show people that I'm willing to listen to a statement full of pain and anger directed at me. In doing this I need to demonstrate my commitment to listening carefully and exercising critical curiosity by asking questions about the experiences that informed that expression. Before asking students to discuss racial topics in groups, I and other faculty colleagues need to do a fishbowl or some other modeling of this process. We need to show students how in our own discussions we strive to understand different racially based perspectives, disagree respectfully but constructively, remain curious about dissenting views, and try not to shut people down prematurely. And if I'm going to ask students about the formative experiences that helped them develop their own racial identities, then I'm going to have to start the process off by disclosing my own.

Conversations about Race Will Not Produce Solutions

This may appear to be a very depressing reality for students and colleagues desperate to know what they can do to help fix the problems identified. There'll be a strong desire for closure at the end of a discussion. People will want to leave with a clear plan for ending racism, a desire to do something, anything.

So it's important as you enter an examination of race and racism to make it clear that racism is far too complex a phenomenon to be analyzed and understood in a semester-long course. Probably the most we can hope for is that people will leave with a deeper understanding of how racism operates in a structural and systemic way, rather than just at the level of individual prejudice and stereotyping. In syllabus statements, workshop objectives, and as we introduce meeting agendas we need to acknowledge that we shouldn't put the burden on ourselves of expecting to generate a solution to something that has confounded so many people for so long.

However, it's equally important to pay attention to considering what small next steps might be taken. Students say they need to leave the class with something other than a sense of total demoralization, a numbing radical pessimism. This is a very

difficult dynamic to negotiate. After all, part of learning about racism is to understand its pervasiveness, the way it's systemically disseminated through the ideology of white supremacy and how it's embedded in institutional policies and practices that come to seem normal and natural. To end a class discussion with some next steps risks trivializing the deep-seated, historical nature of the problem.

But we also need to keep students committed to examining the topic and to answering quite legitimate questions about their future personal, professional, and civic action. One way to do this is through narrative disclosure of your own movement forward into greater understanding or small steps and localized actions you've observed, such as the following:

- A time when you identified a microaggression in yourself and made it public
- An instance when someone who'd dismissed a workshop on racism as political correctness subsequently called out institutional bias
- A situation in which a group discussion that had threatened to shut down was remedied by someone asking a specific question
- A moment when a person of color nominated a white colleague as an ally and explained what informed this judgment
- A moment when someone interrupted a racist statement and made the speaker or group aware of what was being said

Another way to provide some critically tempered hope is to highlight video streams of college and community groups engaged in concrete projects, particularly those involving multiracial groups committing to some common action. The national networks of Showing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ) and Black Youth Project 100 (BYP 100) groups would be examples.

Normalizing Racism

One of the biggest inhibitors to whites participating in racial discussions is the fear of saying the wrong thing and sounding racist. The desire to be seen as a "good white person" (Sullivan, 2014) is quite understandable but it often gets in the way of honest declarations of how racism lies at the core of many whites' identities. To use myself as an example, I've been brought up to fear blackness, particularly when it's manifested in groups of young black men. When I'm walking along the sidewalk and a group of black men approaches I start to tense up and begin the internal debate of whether crossing over to the other side of the street is racist or justified. When I see black professionals in leadership roles I instinctively assume they're there because of affirmative action and that consequently I'll receive an inferior quality of professionalism from them. I tend to think that all blacks share the same views on politics, music, or culture. And as I mentioned in chapter 8, I'm much quicker to grant extensions to black students because I assume they're not as academically talented as whites; consequently, they automatically require special help.

I believe it's crucial for me to talk publicly and in a relaxed manner about these feelings, instincts, and perceptions. Whites need to understand that racism is an ideology that's widely disseminated and learned as part of growing up. To feel these things is empirically normal. Indeed, it would be surprising if a white person grew up in a racist world *without* learning many of these attitudes and beliefs. So part of encouraging critical reflection on race is to normalize its presence.

By normalizing racism I mean getting it out into the open and talking about how racist instincts, judgments, and perceptions are widespread. I want whites to know that sensing and feeling these is not an essentialist verdict on your basic immorality, not an indication that you've failed the test of humanity; rather, it's an empirical confirmation of how successfully the ideology of white supremacy has exerted its influence. Once you think of racism as

an ideology—a set of beliefs, habits, and attitudes that you grow up around and that embed themselves in you—then it becomes easier to acknowledge them. A problem arises when you infer that having these thoughts somehow marks you out as a bad person who's beyond the pale. It doesn't; having racist thoughts in a racist world is completely normal.

So beginning a discussion, workshop, or training with a white facilitator talking about the ways he or she has learned racism and how it manifests itself in his or her behavior helps whites in the group move beyond the guilt they feel about admitting to any racism. Once its normality is understood then they can start focusing on the ways white supremacy shapes behavior and frames interactions across racial differences. Of course, this isn't to approve of racism, but neither is it to condemn someone who's felt it or unwittingly enacted it as inherently evil. Racism is a set of learned behaviors and attitudes picked up in daily interactions, not a sign that someone's been born with a fatal character flaw or an absence of morality or compassion. And, because racist perceptions and practices have been learned it's important to show that they can be challenged and that new behaviors and attitudes can also be learned.

Conclusion

Fostering a critically reflective examination of race is fraught with risks. Identity politics means that if you're a teacher of color you're likely to be accused of having an agenda and of playing the race card. Conversely, if you're a white teacher then sooner or later you'll probably be called a racist. When you bring racial issues into the classroom you always risk making things worse by increasing rather than decreasing the amount of racial misunderstanding in a group. You also risk endangering your professional future by asking people to examine issues they'd often much rather avoid, possibly leading to poor student evaluations. A meta-pedagogic risk is thinking that things are on the verge of getting out of control. Because of the raw emotions associated with any discussion of race, things can change

in an instant and you're often faced with situations in which you feel clueless. You constantly feel like an impostor.

This perception of being an impostor who's faking it is a common experience among those who engage in critical reflection. In chapter 13 I examine this and other risks associated with the process, such as cultural suicide and lost innocence.