Cooperative Inquiry as a Strategy for Facilitating Perspective Transformation

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Abstract

Transforming consciousness in those who assume that their own culture and values are universal and/or superior is a daunting educational challenge. Cooperative Inquiry is a learning strategy that may assist in transforming deep habits of mind and provides support for practicing new behaviors through reflection in action. This case narrative describes how Cooperative Inquiry helped participants understand the dynamics of racism and transform personal consciousness about cultural imperialism, leading to changes in behavior.

Keywords: Racism, Cooperative Inquiry, and Perspective Transformation

Introduction and Background

Transforming consciousness in people who have long taken-for-granted that their own culture, values, and standards are superior and/or universally applicable, or that a universal culture is possible and desirable, is a daunting educational challenge. The purpose of this paper is to describe how people with the power and privilege conferred by White skin used Cooperative Inquiry (CI) as a self-directed learning strategy to change their consciousness and behavior.

Although the United States has often been described as a nation of immigrants, its cultural norms have been heavily influenced by the original colonizing powers of Great Britain and other western European countries. In the last century, the United States has increasingly become a multi-cultural and multi-racial society. Yet, Eurocentric norms and practices continue to be assumed by large segments of its population to be an appropriate universal standard for their own and others' behavior. These Eurocentric norms and practices, sometimes referred to as *White Supremacist Consciousness,* are associated with a history of White colonialism and racism (Hammel, *et al.*, 1998).

The term White supremacist consciousness describes a way of thinking that takes for granted the legitimacy of an American society dominated by White norms and values. This does not mean that we assume that all White people consciously or unconsciously subscribe to these norms, or that such values are exclusive to Whites. Through the process of cultural imperialism, some people of color have also internalized these standards as preferable. The process of privileging these values reinforces institutional racism. Many in our society fail to understand that racism is the institutionalization of privilege based on race, and think of it instead as attitudes and behavior often manifested by individuals. "Many White people think of racism as a problem of individual prejudice and hatred," as Beverly Daniel Tatum put it in a recent New York Times op-ed piece, while many people of color often understand it as, "an intricate web of individual attitudes, cultural messages and institutional practices that systematically advantage Whites and disadvantage people of color." (2000, p. 11). That this consciousness is often invisible to those who hold it strengthens it as a force for hegemony.

Jack Mezirow refers to this kind of constellation of assumed attitudes and cultural messages as a *meaning perspective* or *habit of mind* (1991, 2000). The process of *transformative learning* is a process of making visible perspectives that have been invisible, engaging people in a process whereby they come to recognize the distortions and limitations in their current meaning perspectives and are thus able to create and integrate more appropriate ones. The initial impetus for change may result from a *disorienting dilemma.* Such dilemmas arise when unconscious assumptions about the world become at odds with experience. They may manifest when an individual becomes aware of dissonance between espoused and practiced values or when familiar coping strategies cease to be effective. Often disorienting dilemmas result in moments when previously held views must be discarded, and new perspectives emerge. Mezirow calls these moments *trigger events*.

In our multi-cultural society, there is both a practical and moral imperative that citizens learn to recognize the limitations of meaning perspectives that assume the universality and superiority of white norms and practices. In her analysis of how race is perceived by White dominant society, Ruth Frankenberg (1993) describes three common meaning perspectives. The first she calls *race cognizance.* Within this framework, cultural practices are perceived as different, but equal in value; there is no assumption that White cultural practices are either superior or normative. Race cognizance contrasts with a meaning perspective of *essentialist racism*, where races are perceived as fundamentally different and unequal within systems of White superiority. It also contrasts with perspectives in which differences are denied. Frankenberg calls this third perspective on race a discourse of *power evasiveness*, commonly called color-blindness or essential "sameness." Within this color-blind point of view, which proclaims

all people essentially the same, the dominant culture takes for granted that its own norms and values are universal. Because the assumption of universality is unconscious, when difference is perceived, it is judged as deviant or incorrect. Each of these positions—essentialist racism, power evasiveness, and race cognizance—can be thought of as what Mezirow calls a habit of mind.

Transformation of White supremacist consciousness, whether it takes the form of essentialist racism or power evasiveness, is a particular challenge. In our experience, efforts to educate people from the dominant culture often fall disproportionately on people of color, who find themselves called on to teach White people about racism and White hegemony. As a matter of social justice, White people's limited frames of reference ought not to absorb so much time when they occupy public spaces with people of color. It is our assumption that if White people accepted more responsibility for and could direct their own learning, greater equity would be realized. It should be noted that we do not mean to suggest that the fundamental challenge of confronting racism lies in this transformation process alone. On the contrary, such a transformation, at best, appears to allow White participants to see past the barrier of the belief that racism is solely a product of individual behavior.

In the research that is the subject of this paper, we studied a transformative educational process called Cooperative Inquiry (CI). CI is a systematic strategy for self-directed group inquiry that has been developed over the past thirty years as a research strategy (Heron, 1996; Heron & Reason, 1997). Only recently, under the nomenclature of Collaborative Inquiry, has it been conceptualized and studied as a liberatory structure for adult learning (Bray, et al., 2000). In this particular CI, groups made up only of White people formed inquiry groups in which, through self-directed cycles of action and reflection, they attempted to guide their own transformation of meaning perspective about race and cultural hegemony. As part of the original design, all participants in the CI identified as White. This unusual "Whites Only" strategy for membership in the CI groups was seen as a way to complement, not replace, other multicultural learning experiences in the lives of the participants. Many participants previously or simultaneously pursued other educational activities in this area.

CI has several characteristics that were attractive to us for the purposes of this study. The CI process requires self-direction and an experience-based epistemology that focuses on the lived experience of the participants. CI also celebrates an axiology of human flourishing, and is implemented in a group context that fosters trust, vulnerability and a sense of community. The purpose of our study was to explore the degree to which CI served as an effective self-directed strategy for transformation in White supremacist consciousness.

Methods

Study Design: Four different CI groups, comprised of 19 European-Americans, participated in a Cultural Consciousness Project for the duration of the 1998-99 academic year. The intention of these groups was to engage questions regarding the role that White supremacist consciousness played in the participants' lives. Six members of the research team were also participants in the CI process and the seventh was the Cultural Consciousness Project coordinator. We interviewed all nineteen participants to determine: 1) what the impact was of the inquiry process on participants' worldview about race and White supremacist consciousness, and 2) what elements of the inquiry process most directly contributed to learning and/or changes in consciousness.

The interviews were taped and transcribed to create text for data analysis. All seven researchers coded the full transcript data set independently for emergent themes. We then met as a team for several rounds of reflection to verify and refine our thematic inferences. Analysis and interpretation in this paper also include reflections on our own individual and collective experiences during the original inquiry.

We identified common themes relevant to our inquiry: the roles of vulnerability and trust amongst group members, the emergence of compassion for self and others, increased awareness of White norms and privileges, and shifts from personal passivity to an emergent interpersonal activism (Barlas, *et al*., 2000). We also examined the data to see how closely the participants had adhered to the principles of CI. Our analysis confirmed that each group created conditions and used processes largely consistent with CI. There was a shared commitment to democratic participation, shared responsibility for facilitation, shared intention to engage questions about White supremacist consciousness, and some procedure for testing the group's emergent learning by putting the group's ideas into practice.

Participants: There were nineteen participants in four Cooperative Inquiry (CI) groups, who met to inquire into the impact of White supremacist consciousness on members' lives. All agreed to participate in our subsequent study. Three of the groups were comprised of all women, while one group had two men. Sixteen of the participants

were graduate students. Two were faculty members. Participation in both the CI process and the interviews was voluntary. Pseudonyms have been used for all reports.

Analysis: In order to better highlight the types of shifts in consciousness and behavior that resulted from the CI process, we have chosen to focus on one participant's story. The transcript of Eleanor's interview included her self-description of the nature and processes of change in her life as well as the role she attributed to CI in facilitating those changes. We referred back to the themes that were identified in our original analysis of the full data set and used those themes to guide us in the shaping of Eleanor's narrative. Her interview transcript was then analyzed to identify *narrative segments*, or the elements that make up stories in William LaBov's descriptive analysis of narrative structures (LaBov, 1972). Using methods described by Elliot Mischler (1986), a core narrative of her transformation of consciousness was then constructed from several incidents she had described. The story of Eleanor's transformation as a case narrative was constructed using direct quotations from her interview. Eleanor was then invited to review and respond to our construction; these further refinements are reflected in the final text.

Results: Case Narrative

Eleanor teaches at a community college in a fast-growing and formerly rural part of California. As a European-American woman, her own whiteness had been "very invisible" to her prior to engaging in the Cultural Consciousness Project. "I used to think about these things and how nice it would be, sort of in an idealist way, like it would be wonderful if the world could be like that [free of racism], but I never really did do anything about it. I didn't speak out about it." When she was interviewed in January 2000, six months after the completion of her group's CI, she offered a very different description of herself. She is now acting as a leader on her institution's diversity committee and incorporating reflection on ethnic heritage into her teaching. Perhaps more fundamentally, she sees herself as having "so much more courage and boldness" not just to speak out, but also to examine her own attitudes and learn from them. She now sees differently times where issues of difference arose in the course of her doctoral program. "... I didn't appreciate my experience[s] of [difference] ... because some of them were what I would have called negative. I am really appreciating diversity and complexity." She now looks back and asks, "Why did I get so upset over some of those things?" and seeks to learn from the answers.

In looking back at her self before participating in the CI on White supremacist consciousness, she describes herself as "a typical White liberal." She was aware of race as an issue because she often taught in classes that had "quite a minority of Caucasian students and a majority of Asian, Hispanic and Black [students]." Despite this opportunity to engage questions regarding race and White privilege, she had felt that asking her students to look at their own cultural awareness was rude, "almost me looking at them as if they were in a zoo or something." From her current perspective, she attributes this sense that she would be objectifying her students to the fact that she "was so aware that I had never done any work like that on myself."

Her responses before her decision to participate in CI were largely passive; she "didn't speak out." In the course of her interview, she characterized herself as "a real unconscious good White person." She described the associated habits of mind in this way: "As White women we have been taught if you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all. We have been really taught that if you can't *think* something nice, don't *think* anything at all." Eleanor suppressed racist responses she might have in her daily life or any events where she might have practiced racist behavior. "I would just close them down so fast that they wouldn't really have contained any reality for me because I wouldn't experience them. Then I couldn't remember them because I would never have experienced them, really fully experienced them."

In describing her transformation, Eleanor identifies two trigger events. The first came in the summer of 1998 while Eleanor attended a conference on earth-based traditions. At the conclusion of one of the conference panels, a White woman in the audience asked in earnest about how she could help fight racism. The two African American panelists said, as Eleanor recalls, "You need to learn for yourselves what it's like to be a White person in this culture and to be a part of White supremacy." Eleanor responded to this exchange "thrilled to have that as an invitation because [I] had wanted to do that, but that it almost seemed like a racist thing to do." This invitation freed her from her fear of violating what she considered the "good-girl" code about thinking bad thoughts. Her previous fear had been that "to study your White privilege was to be reinforcing it and making it more powerful and more oppressive to minority people." While she had already planned to participate in the Cultural Consciousness Project to meet a degree requirement, she "wasn't really committed" to participate until this "invitation."

Eleanor's participation in the Project began in August 1998 when her inquiry group came together to begin their CI into the subject of White supremacist consciousness. Consistent with the procedures for this method, the

group set out collectively to define the scope and nature of their question. They understood that an important element for CI was the fact that the group's organizing question had to focus on the lived experience of the participants themselves. At the first meeting, Eleanor remembered, "having a real strong feeling that nothing that I do will make any difference if I don't work on myself first." With some mixed feelings, Eleanor's small group decided to formulate the inquiry question as: "How does White supremacy arise in my own daily experience?"

In the course of its ten months together, her group chose a number of "actions" or activities to be conducted during the times between the group's reflections. The assignments gave Eleanor permission to ponder the racist thoughts that were going through her mind. She considered this "part of [my] White conditioning—to be a good student, to be goodie two-shoes, to be the one who does her homework."

Eleanor felt that the group's reflections on member's actions were central to their learning. She stated that, "the most important thing was the sharing [in our group]. We were able to share embarrassing things that we were ashamed of and embarrassed about in an open and honest way." While the process of having a White group reflect on Whiteness could have reinforced or normalized racist behavior, instead, in Eleanor's description, it heightened her and her group's awareness of the consequences of their previously unconscious assumptions. "[W]e looked at how much privilege we actually had [and] spoke about the [privileges] that were important to us that we hadn't noticed before." This particular action and reflection led the group to another action: "If there is a racist incident that takes place in front of you, what should you do about it?"

It was this action that resulted in what would become the second trigger event in Eleanor's transformation. The occasion arose while she was standing in a long line at a fast food restaurant. It was crowded. A White man behind her in line said to her, with apparent irritation, "Oh, there is nothing but Vietnamese people anymore anywhere you go." Eleanor was startled, especially by the assumption that she would automatically agree with his negative, racist comment. "It was like one of those [defining moments], I just froze." Because of her group's action, she was thinking, "okay now what should I say to him? I couldn't really think of a good thing to say. This was maybe a month into the first semester [of the Project]. What I actually did was I turned around and said, 'yes' and smiled." Eleanor had hoped the man would realize that she was pleased about the presence of Vietnamese people. "I think I would have previously just ignored him and thought to myself, 'What an ignorant man,' or something like that. I would have made some quick judgment about him and then that would have been probably the end of it." Eleanor felt that the CI on cultural consciousness was directly responsible for her ability to remain in that expanded moment. Despite this shift from passivity to action, she was not entirely comfortable. She experienced herself as "more interested in trying to get something to eat … I was trying not to antagonize him, but trying not to go along with him." Eleanor shared this experience and reflected on it with her inquiry group.

Unsatisfied by the lack of clarity in her response and consistent with CI's emphasis on exploring experience through different representational modes, Eleanor wrote "a big essay" on the event, which she entitled "Speechless in Sonora." In it she described herself and the events, writing about her inability "to know what to do and about my own inner awareness and desire to say something," to help this man "see how racist his remark was." As it turns out, the essay took on a life of its own.

Eleanor took this same paper back to her class of diverse students. She had given an assignment for each of them to write about their own experience of racism. As noted earlier, it was an assignment that she would have been uncomfortable giving before her participation in CI. "I read [my essay] first and you could just feel the whole room shift. It was really powerful because I think of how honest I was and it was hard for me to be this way. And you know the [students] knew that [it was hard for me]."

It was difficult for Eleanor to admit that she was "speechless in Sonora," but the momentum from sharing such stories with her inquiry group propelled her into sharing stories and speaking out in her school. She began by telling her students about the course on White consciousness in which she was participating. Then she sent the essay to a faculty magazine to be included in an issue focused on diversity. It has also become the foundation for organizing an in-service program on cultural consciousness with her colleagues. Eleanor goes on to explain how her experience has been catalyzing for her entire school. "To affirm what other people have already tried to do for a long time, we have regrouped … it is full of energy now." They have established new committees, taken on new projects and gained substantial institutional support. One impact of Eleanor's enthusiasm is that others who had been silent have begun to speak out about making changes at the school.

While these turns in Eleanor's professional life are impressive, the more fundamental and apparently irreversible changes emerge in her basic mental frameworks and the minutiae of everyday interaction. She describes

her new habits of mind in this way: "I just have so much more courage and boldness than I did [a year ago]. I think because I can have my inner thoughts heard by myself," even when they are "not nice … I feel like I am a little bit accomplished at it now." She recalls an incident, early in her work with the inquiry, where she had called one of her students Pancho instead of his correct name, Pablo, an incident she describes as "horrifying." What was striking to Eleanor was that she was no longer suppressing her responses and avoiding self-reflection. "I was able to experience myself in my own race, racist kind of set of mental reactions or something." She had compassion for herself at the same time that she was traumatized by what she felt was an insensitive slip on her part. This movement from denial and suppression of experience to a more open and compassionate response was consistent with the experience of many of the CI participants (Barlas, *et al*, 2000). In her continued attention to these responses, Eleanor feels capable of continuing to learn about her own attitudes and the attitudes of those around her.

Discussion

This study, which looks at how a group of white people can facilitate their own perspective transformation using CI, does have two significant limitations. While our participants attribute changes in attitudes and behaviors to their experiences in the Cultural Consciousness Project, it is difficult to assess the actual impact because it is hard to tease out the effect of CI from the other activities and influences in people's lives. First, there is a lack of rich description of other activities in people's lives that might also influence perspective transformation. Second, the participants in our research represent a special group of people. They are homogenous in motivation for change, education level and gender. Clearly, Eleanor and her work environment were ripe for change. Eleanor was in the midst of completing her course work for her Ph.D., with all of the stimuli and receptiveness that can accompany that process. Still, in her discussion of the experience, there are aspects of her transformation that specifically reflect the CI method employed.

CI offered Eleanor permission to be attendant to her habits of mind, habits that included suppressing attention to this issue. That this attention took place in the midst of an action planned by her inquiry group is significant. Actions in CI are heuristic in that they are questions one carries, frequently without being able to anticipate when they may become salient as they suddenly did for Eleanor at the fast-food restaurant. She noted that simply attending to that event—in action—had allowed her to unpack more of what was going on for her. "There is so much there in that little moment … it feels almost like [an] infinitely large little moment and then it collapses and then you have to like go on with chronological time." This is fully consistent with John Heron's (1996, p. 16) description of the action phase of CI as "a transactional manifold of meaning, relating a person intentionally to their world … Action consummates and fulfills thought, completes it through manifestation. Action in the form of reshaping our worlds—economically, technologically, ecologically, aesthetically, politically, socially—is the end of thought, thought is not the end of action; this is the basic asymmetry." Schön (1987) names this kind of experience as "reflection-in-action," which is distinguished from other types of reflection because of its immediate relevance to action in the moment. This link between reflection-in-action and changes in behavior is most encouraging for adult educators interested in doing more than simply raising intellectual awareness of issues.

Participation in her inquiry group provided Eleanor with the context and support to examine her experiences further, especially those she previously suppressed. She reflects on how groups can create a context of trust such that participants are able to become vulnerable enough to recognize and examine felt experiences of racist thoughts and behaviors. This is consistent with John Heron's model of how people learn from their experience. Using Heron's model as an interpretive frame, we saw the role played by feelings and emotions (Heron, 1996). The CI emphasis on exploring emotions and experience through the process of different representational forms dovetailed effectively with her new confidence to explore cultural heritage in her class, which led to the creation of her "big essay."

Whether or not such a transformation would have taken place for Eleanor, it seems relatively safe to say that her participation in the CI group facilitated and supported the associated changes in behavior. There is also evidence that the changes are consistent with Mezirow's understanding of transformative learning. Her initial self-description implies a disorienting dilemma. While she describes herself as "a good white liberal," consistent with a position of power evasiveness, her discomfort with examining race from this perspective implies a dissonance between stated and practiced values. Two experiences, Eleanor's sense of "invitation" into this inquiry and her confrontation in the restaurant, qualify as trigger events, the results of which were revised patterns of understanding and behavior. Of equal importance, Eleanor perceived them as pivotal to her development. Finally, her descriptions of qualitative changes, such as growing pervasiveness of race consciousness and her capacity to speak with others about White hegemony appear to reflect changed habits of mind.

Eleanor developed several capacities that contributed to her shift in meaning perspective. As discussed in our previous report (Barlas, *et al.*, 2000), many participants shared Eleanor's sense of growing compassion towards her own racist attitudes and those of others. In her encounter with the man at the restaurant, she was able to face, rather than suppress, her response to his offensive comment. Along with our other participants, Eleanor credited this new openness to her ability to integrate the complexity of her responses to racist behavior in herself as well as others and, ultimately, take action for change. This kind of reflection in action helped fuel her rather remarkable impact upon her work system. Eleanor's enhanced ability to be vulnerable with the negative sides of herself—with her CI group, her students and her workplace—demonstrates another critical quality for Mezirow's "developmentally progressive meaning perspective" (Mezirow, 1991, p. 156). Since Eleanor was able to allow new information and experiences into her life that she would not ordinarily have encountered or reflected upon, she was able to turn one disorienting dilemma into a stream of new awareness and changes in behavior. This permeability on her part, as demonstrated by her experience of the "expanded moment" or her engagement with her students on race and culture is, as Mezirow suggests, important for the future and her ability to continue her transformative learning. Such openness means that she can continue to move in the world in a way that is "more inclusive, discriminating and integrated" (Mezirow, 1991, p. 156).

Conclusions

The research has several implications. First, this liberatory structure for self-directed adult learning proved a powerful facilitator of significant shifts in meaning perspectives. As exemplified in Eleanor's story, participants were able to challenge hegemonic points of view. Second, learning about the process of cooperative inquiry as a facilitative strategy can help adult educators who seek to develop "learning-to-learn" skills in adults. These skills are relevant for many contexts where participatory-based learning strategies—including action learning, action science, or participatory action research—are used. Third, the role played by feeling and emotion was clearly of great significance and may have implications for other investigations of the process of learning from experience. Finally, insights about White supremacist consciousness may inform adult educators who are members of groups near the hegemonic center (most particularly, educators who are White and/or male) about needed transformations of their own consciousness if they are to be humane participants in a diverse society. The research team concludes that CI is a viable strategy for helping people with power and privilege expand personal consciousness of their privilege and its impact on their lives.

Note

1 The authors of this paper have been working collaboratively for two years at the California Institute of Integral Studies on the subject of White Supremacist Consciousness. Names are listed in alphabetical order and do not reflect the traditional hierarchy of author contribution.

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