

Exploring Pathways to Whiteness as a System of Knowing: Transformation of Thought and Action

European-American Collaborative Challenging Whiteness¹
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Abstract: *Six White educators examine their relationship to Whiteness in order to understand how this relationship influences their perceptions and behavior in multicultural environments. Results are presented as one case narrative.*

We have often wondered, along with many colleagues, why we as White educators are not more successful in involving People of Color in our programs and organizations. These questions have complex, socio-historical answers for which we do not presume to offer definitive answers. However, we have a perspective on the issue that seems helpful. The purpose of this paper is to illustrate our perspective through narrative analysis of one life history, drawn from a larger empirical study.

Our Assumptions about Changing Institutional Hegemony

We begin with the assumption that many White educators in largely White institutions are trying in good faith to create more inclusive environments. We include ourselves in this group. We note that institutions make many efforts to be inclusive: they create an array of special services for targeted "minorities," sponsor diversity training, initiate diversity task forces, and support multicultural curricula. Although we agree that efforts like these are critical, our premise is that they are insufficient for creating change. We believe that in order to create environments that are genuinely inclusive, White people need to become more aware of themselves as people with particular cultural practices and beliefs. Without awareness of whiteness, well-meaning White educators and students create norms that are *de facto* exclusive.

People of Color, especially African-Americans, have for many years noted the profound lack of self-awareness among White people² (Du Bois, 1903; Ani, 1994). Increasingly, White voices have joined this discourse² (Katz, 1977; Frankenberg, 1993). During the past five years, our research team has pursued different lines of inquiry into the impact of White supremacist norms in our own and other educators' lives. We are recognizing the importance of understanding our oppressive behaviors as embedded in a whole system of thought — with an ontology, epistemology, methodology, and axiology. This system of thought is characterized by individualism, dualism, a deep belief in the power of objectivity, analytic thinking, and universal truths, as well as a stubbornly intransigent hegemony (Paxton, 2003).

Research Design

We are six European-American adult educators who investigated our collective experience in a heuristic inquiry into White systems of knowing. According to White educator Clark Moustakas (1990), "Heuristic inquiry offers possibilities for understanding transitions in the development of identity, personality, character, and selfhood ... useful in resolution of dysfunctional behavior and in corrections of distorted perceptions...." (p. 102). We began with an expressive exercise that helped each group member reflect upon and represent his or her individual journey in understanding what it means to be White. We used the resulting collages as a catalyst for extensive interview activity, spending several hours with each individual's story and pausing as a

group to explore emerging insights about both the individual storyteller and our group's research topic. After independently coding the transcripts, we engaged as a team in rounds of reflection to refine our thematic inferences, building on our shared experience inquiring into Whiteness.

By sharing and deconstructing our life stories, we discovered some common themes that describe how we were socialized into a White system of thought and how this process influences our perceptions and behavior in multicultural environments. These themes include: childhood experiences with race, experience of shame when not adhering to White norms for interaction, repression of feelings, becoming silent or emotionally withdrawn when confronted with racial topics, persistent feelings of separation and isolation within one's own White culture, lack of felt interconnection and community, and immersion in an epistemology of dualism.

In order to breathe life into the themes of our findings, we focus on one participant's story.

Results of Case Narrative

We chose Robin because her life story is a microcosm of our assumptions about the steps organizations might take to become more inclusive. We have asserted that organizational efforts on behalf of "minorities" will not be effective until the White people in those organizations understand themselves as people with culturally-specific ways of being. We discovered a parallel pattern in our data, particularly in Robin's story. Robin discovered that her work as a social justice practitioner became significantly more effective once she began to examine her own cultural identities as a White person and as a Jew.

Robin's Story about Race up until Graduate School

Robin was born in 1949 and grew up in a northern Virginia suburb of Washington, DC. Her Jewish parents raised Robin to be assimilated, to "blend in and belong" as an American. Robin felt that growing up as a largely assimilated Jew meant that she "never thought about being... distinguished from White," but in retrospect, "I did have feelings of not fitting in, of not being like the other kids." Her friends were all Christian and most of their fathers worked at the Pentagon. "I just wished I could be Protestant and have my father be a major in the army too."

Robin's passion for activism and racial justice, which she developed as a young adult, has its roots in a value she embraced at an early age. "When I was about four years old, something happened.... I got very angry and said, 'That's not fair!' My mother said to me, 'Robin, the world's not fair.' I hated that and I feel like I have fought that my whole life.... My whole mission could be summed up in that sentence—'Things should be fair.'"

Robin distinctly remembers her first exposure to issues of race and racism. "In terms of racism, the big shift in awareness was in 1969 when I was a junior at a predominantly White, moderate to conservative upper middle class Midwestern college.... One day, I was walking on the quad and there was this huge group of people...a mass meeting.... The two young women leading the whole thing were...African-American women that were freshmen on my floor...I was their resident advisor. The controversy was around this...beautiful white chair...with a red velvet cushion. [The women] were [upset] that \$10,000 had been spent on this chair, instead of [putting the money] towards scholarships for African American students. That night, late at night, I went into their room, and I said, 'Would you talk to me?' And we stayed up all night. They told me what it was like growing up in [predominantly Black] East St. Louis.... They talked about how, even growing up poor, that your appearance was really important.... They always wore skirts and

heels, when the rest of us middle class kids looked like hippies. And I had just never even thought about it. It was like this huge window opened in my mind.” Robin “went out the next day and bought *Soul On Ice* by Eldridge Cleaver, and read that.... We shut down classes, and had alternative classes that people ran about Blackness and racism and alternative education. It...was by far the biggest learning experience I had in those four years.”

From her college experience with African Americans, Robin noticed their sense of community. “I so wanted to be Black.... You could feel the connection they had with each other, the affirmation and the joy, it was wonderful.... It was around the period of Black Power and that positive view of Blackness. And I remember ... feeling like, ‘Oh, I want what they have. I don't have that.’” This theme of wanting to absorb something from Black culture is a theme Robin would revisit.

When asked about her commitment to social action, Robin explained, “For me politics is all about how we treat each other.... When this happened with the two young African American students [I thought] ‘Oh my God, look at what's happened to them.’ It was very much about these human beings that I knew and cared about...and how they're being treated unfairly.” Robin's experience—developing an understanding of racism and committing to anti-racist action because of relationship with People of Color—is repeated as a pattern in our data.

After college, Robin worked with a progressive feminist organization that was the most multicultural group she had ever been part of. “A lot of things happened where I really had to confront...[my] White supremacist ways of being.... I had to start listening to what [Women of Color] were saying.” From the placement of Robin's office desk to her management of an income-generating marketplace, Robin learned “to look at my behavior, the feelings of superiority and entitlement...the feeling of my needs coming first and wanting to control everything.” Prior to that time, Robin had not understood the mismatch between how she acted and her avowed commitments to racial justice. She began to ask, “How do we really share power here?”

Robin had more to learn about matching her actions to her espoused values. In the early 1980s, she attended a speech by African American cultural historian, Bernice Johnson Reagon, who asked the audience, “Who do you know? Where do you live? Who do you work with? Who do you eat with? Who do you sleep with?” Robin observes, “as much as I was [already] an anti-racism activist...I realized the people around me were basically White. I consciously made a decision and started changing it right then.”

Robin's developing capacity for understanding how People of Color were treated unfairly led her to become an activist for social and racial justice. Such behavior would rank Robin quite highly in models of White identity development (Helms, 1984; Hardiman, 1994) since those models tend to pay more attention to White attitudes about People of Color than they do to the White person's own racial awareness and self-identity. Again, we note that identity models parallel the assumptions we observe are implicit in organizational efforts to be inclusive. The focus is on “the other” instead of “the White self.”

Robin's Experience of Exploring her Whiteness and Cultural Background

Robin found that she had more to learn. In 1994, she enrolled in a graduate program to study learning and change in human systems. “I had done a lot of social change work , but I didn't

always feel that effective." By this time, "Most of my close friends were Women of Color.... I learned by working with People of Color, especially women, [who] added so much to my life....a richness that I loved..." As a result, Robin recalls that she was "pretty much disparaging of White culture and White ways of being—[being White] felt kind of bland." She also reflects on her motives, "I got some kind of ego thing from being close friends of these Women of Color, being seen as an ally, and being esteemed in that way. I was the 'good White person!'" Robin's activism helped to distance her from awareness about her own Whiteness.

Robin's worldview about race clearly influenced her reactions to her classmates on the first day of class in graduate school. "[I] made a bunch of judgments [and] decided I wanted to throw out half the [White] people...especially those with corporate backgrounds." Before the week was over, Robin began to realize she had something to learn. "[That first week] was this huge breaking open of everything I thought I knew about race, and how to be a good ally.... it was humbling." Robin explains that she was "trying very hard to be an ally...I'm trying to speak up on behalf of the African American women [and one of them] said, 'Please don't speak for me, I need to hear my own voice.' And I'm like, 'Wait, I thought these were the rules, this is how to be an ally.'"

Ultimately, Robin felt the big opening of her awareness about Whiteness came when the cohort divided into "the White and Black teams," utilizing the Cultural Synergy process (Tang, 1997). When the White team gathered to work on "self-knowing," Robin reflected, "we started telling our stories, and my heart opened...you could feel different people's pain.... I started seeing White people as good people who were really struggling.... A lot of what we talked about...was about feeling separate, alienated, and lonely.... I let myself really start connecting, in a way that I had [only] let myself connect to my friends of Color.... And valuing [White people] as precious, worthwhile, good people."

Robin's new connection to other White people was a dramatic change from her first day in the cohort. For example, near the end of her cohort's second year, at the White team's final meeting, she noticed that one of the men was silent. He "was the corporate guy, he was big, he definitely embodied the White stuff ... and I said to him, 'It must be really hard being a White man.' And I felt it in my heart. He started sobbing. I remember us all holding him. And I couldn't have done that even a year earlier."

"It was in that White [cultural synergy] team that I started embodying...being connected to White people the same way I had taken on in my anti-racism work wanting to be with People of Color.... Some of us started...taking more risks, being willing to face our assumptions, building a real community." She describes how the team learned "how we...numb out.... The haze, the White haze—when we get scared we freeze and shut down."

As Robin became increasingly aware of what it meant to be White, she also became aware of the ways in which she was cut off from experiencing her full identity. As part of a multicultural group exploring identity, Robin commented at the end of one meeting, "What's my story? I don't have a story." A woman of Color in the group commented, "I feel like you're trying to pull something from us for yourself. There's something you need to find in you that you're trying desperately to pull out of us." In a different group, a Mizrahi (Arab) Jewish woman observed that although Robin felt she had power as a White middle-class woman, she had lost the power of her "Jewish voice." Robin recalls "When [I heard] that, I felt my whole life I had been speaking

from my stomach up and there was a whole part of my body that had been cut off...like my voice was in a minor key, and all my life I had been pushed into trying to be a major key."

In Robin's graduate school cohort, Women of Color and two Jewish women helped her connect with her Jewishness. "In the process of really seeing what assimilation had cost me, that my whole life I had been living from this white place, but I had pushed down that Jewish place.... Authenticity ... it's the thing I've always wanted to be, and always felt that I was. I didn't realize how much I wasn't...." Another one of Robin's friends commented, "Robin, I used to feel that you were trying to get something from the rest of us, and now you've gotten it for yourself."

Robin's New Relationship to Whiteness and the Implications of Her Learning

Looking back on her life and the different stages of her learning she, Robin commented, "I feel like there's two big pieces. One is more about the issue of racism, and one is more about the issue of White consciousness. I've learned the most about racism ... from those close relationships. I could feel, in these people [of Color] I loved, what happened to them, and how they saw the world every day and how the world treated them, and that's when it got in my body." What Robin added to her empathic approach with People of Color was the importance of simultaneously being willing to engage with other White people, "keeping connected to other White people, that's the most crucial piece." She concludes, "What I've learned in [graduate school] is [that fairness] is complicated and complex ... people have a lot of different ideas of what 'fair' is. It's not as Black and White as I thought." She goes on to observe that her social activist work is more effective, now that she can express herself from a place of compassion for groups she perceives as being the oppressor.

Robin's commitment to fairness is longstanding, but she has changed her understanding of what comprises fairness. For some time, her ideas were shaped by the dualistic epistemology often associated with White systems of thought. She felt she could recognize situations that were "not fair." She could learn "the right way" to be an ally to People of Color, create the "right" pattern of personal relationships. It seemed that if she were to embrace People of Color she would have to reject her own white community. Through the power of empathic connection, Robin gradually learned that her dualistic ways of negotiating her actions were limiting, confining, and inadequate. She comments, "Dualism discourages critical thinking. When you can label things as right or wrong, you don't have to think."

Implications for Changing Institutional Hegemony

White educators often find themselves championing social justice causes on behalf of "the other," just as Robin did. As they become more aware of the pervasiveness of racism and the rewards of White privilege, White people often become mired in denial. This denial can take many forms — direct, conscious denial that White privilege exists; repression of shameful feelings that paralyze any effort to act; or perception of self as "a good White person" who can dissociate from the harm caused by "bad White people." None of these responses leads effectively to social or institutional change.

We recommend that all institutions create supportive environments where White people can explore these issues in community with other White people. Cycles of denial need to be disrupted. White people need to embrace themselves as a people, not only by recognizing their participation in institutional oppression but also by acknowledging their strengths and contributions. As White people become more aware of Whiteness as a cultural way of being,

they also become more aware of the magnitude of the racial divide. This developing consciousness changes people's capacities for respectful participation in multicultural environments.

Note

1. The European-American Collaborative Challenging Whiteness fosters research and learning about the subject of Whiteness. The use of collective authorship under the name of the Collaborative reflects our understanding of how knowledge is constructed. Members, who came together originally through their association with the California Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco, are: Carole Barlas, Elizabeth Kasl, Alec MacLeod, Doug Paxton, Penny Rosenwasser and Linda Sartor. The Collaborative can be reached at: collaborative@eccw.org
2. For an expanded list of references about this "profound lack of self-awareness among White people," contact author at collaborative@eccw.org.

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