Action Research

A R T I C L E

Reflections on Erica Foldy's first-person inquiry

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A B S T R A C T

In support of Erica Foldy's premise that we cannot learn about race until we make it a 'discussible', we join her in reflecting on the relationship between her white identity and her dissertation research. We describe experiences of our own that are very like Erica's – seeking absolution and approval from people of color, hoping that we can develop relationships with people of color that will somehow transcend race, taking responsibility for our limited consciousness about white hegemony so that people of color won't have to spend so much effort educating us. We also explore what we think are unanswered questions in Erica's first-person inquiry and conclude by describing an important state of inquiring mind that we call critical humility.

KEY WORDS

- authentic voice
- critical humility
- power evasiveness
- race cognizance
- white consciousness
- white hegemony

We are pleased to participate with Erica Foldy in helping to make race 'a discussible' by engaging in public dialogue about the experience of being white. Because our own interests and research activities have been so similar to hers, we were invited by the editors of *Action Research* to share our perspective on her first-person inquiry. Erica explains that she wanted to focus her inquiry 'on the mutual impact of my racial identity on the research and, in turn, the research on my racial identity'. The research to which she refers is her dissertation inquiry about 'how organizations influence the race, gender, and class identities of their members'.

We are six scholar-practitioners from the United States who have been together since 1998, inquiring into the impact of our everyday white consciousness on our own and others' lives. During our first year together we used co-operative inquiry to engage our topic; since that first year, we have continued our cooperative inquiry while also expanding our activities to include more traditional research and scholarly pursuits.

Going public on what it is like to be white is enormously challenging. We always feel ourselves stepping gingerly, as if on wobbly rocks across a treacherous river, hoping for few missteps. However, we too are committed to Erica's premise – that we cannot 'engage in learning about race' until white people become able to make race, especially their own, a 'discussable'. Despite our fear of misstep, we therefore join Erica in this public dialogue. Our approach is to respond to the reflections in her inquiry that hold particular resonance for us. She often describes an insight or experience that is so like our own, we are moved to share a personal example, hoping that by adding another example we may be holding up a mirror for readers who are also resonating with what Erica has written. At other times, we explain how our experiences and reflections diverge.

One of our first 'ahas' of recognition was set off by Erica's powerful analysis of the dream about JM. As she searches for the underlying meaning of the dream, Erica writes, 'I feel like I am looking for absolution from this project. I want people of color, especially black people, to tell me I'm ok, I'm not a bad person, I might even be a good person'. In our group's cooperative inquiry, we adopted the phrase 'good white person' to encapsulate our recognition of similar feelings. In several of our action cycles, we paid attention to the circumstances when we felt most needy of being seen as 'a good white person' and grappled with our complex attitudes about our desire to distance ourselves from 'bad white persons'. As with Erica, our urge to see ourselves as the 'good white person' is both an atonement for past sins, about which we feel guilty, and an expression of our strong desire to earn the approval and friendship of people of color. What saddens us, at times, is wondering whether our pursuit of friendship is as much in service of our need to prove we are 'ok' as it is for the joy and stimulation of the friendship. What humbles us is recognizing that our effort to separate ourselves from other white people is fraught with arrogance, dualism, and self-deception.

Another of Erica's discoveries resonates deeply with us. In her interaction with Gloria, Erica comes to realize 'we can't eliminate race . . .' She explains,

> . . . I felt that we [Gloria and I] really had connected across race. Yet, in her email message, Gloria was telling me that my whiteness was always present for her. My disappointment in her comment made me realize that somehow I had hoped otherwise, that race might become invisible, that we could transcend race. (this issue, pp. xxx)

We wonder what impulse tells us that the 'elimination' of race is somehow desirable. All the members of our group have shared painful stories of stumbling over the assumption Erica describes. Hoping that our relationship with a person of color has somehow freed itself (and us) of race, we discover over and over again that we have said something hurtful or we have assumed we were welcome when we were not. We are surprised when our desire to eliminate race has the impact of making a person of color feel invisible rather than 'equal'.

Although none of us knows exactly how to follow it, Pat Parker's advice shines a beacon. In her poem, 'For the white person who wants to know how to be my friend' she explains:

> The first thing you do is to forget that i'm Black.
> Second, you must never forget that i'm Black. (Parker, 1990, p. 297)

When we ponder the role of race in our relationships, we, like Erica, find Ruth Frankenberg's analysis of racism instructive. Frankenberg would call the assumption that race can be irrelevant a position of 'power evasiveness'. When white people imagine that race is not a factor in relationship, they are more vulnerable to the sort of hegemony that Tien describes to Erica when she says, 'Don't take this to offense, but that's your time, your environment. Other groups may not have the same environment, same thinking.'

Erica interprets her growing confidence in claiming her voice as a step toward the position Frankenberg calls 'race cognizance'. We also aspire to live our lives from that position. Knowing how to do it is very hard: We wonder when our attempts to offer our skills or knowledge are unwitting acts of hegemony. We puzzle over how we can learn to 'forget and never forget'. When Tien warns Erica that her voice might not be useful because it is 'western, imperialist, logic model, a-b-c-d and boom, outcomes', we hear our friends of color who are willing to signal us when we are manifesting the hegemony of 'power evasiveness'.

We have questions about Erica's analysis of how she is now claiming her voice as an organizer. From the written page, it is impossible to know whether Erica's sense that she is adding her own positive contribution to 'the mix' is being received by the group in the spirit she intends or is instead received as a dominating and condescending effort offered from an 'imperialist' mind that fails to recognize her knowledge is 'western' and not useful. To find out more, we would

have to talk with the people in the group. However, finding out more doesn't seem to be the important issue here. What seems to us important is the way Erica has opened the inquiry. With reflective analysis and candor she makes her thought process public, so that others can test their own perceptions about how to move from 'power evasiveness' to 'race cognizance'. Her invitation to the inquiry through personal example seems to us to be an act of great courage.

Another resonance with our experience is Erica's observation, 'My concern is that people of color shouldn't have to take care of white people when white people feel guilty or feel angst or even feel really confused.' Our group's very existence is a manifestation of this insight. When we came together in 1998, we were part of a 'cultural consciousness' project that was instituted in our school to provide a structure for white people to explore the impact of white hegemony on themselves and others. Over the course of several years, many different cooperative inquiry groups were fielded. The motivating force was the notion that white faculty and students needed to have a place where they could change their consciousness without inflicting so much of their ignorance and confusion on students and faculty of color in our multicultural learning environments. We have described this project in detail elsewhere (Barlas et al., 2000; European-American Collaborative Challenging Whiteness, 2002).

We also resonate strongly with Erica's description of how she came to recognize the implications of Mike's position, a position that she realizes she herself took not long ago. Further, her discussion about fear of mistakes is enormously important. This fear is a quintessential experience for white people here in the States. It is one of the primary reasons that white people, consciously and unconsciously, attempt to keep race relegated to the category 'undiscussable'.

When we read the purpose of Erica's first-person inquiry, we imagined she would explore some issues that don't actually turn up in her discussion. She explains she launched her inquiry 'to explore what was happening with me as I conducted a qualitative, largely third-person research project', telling the reader 'I focus specifically on the mutual impact of my racial identity on the research and, in turn, the research on my racial identity.' As we have been noting, many of Erica's descriptions about how her research impacted her racial identity strike deep chords of recognition for us. However, we anticipated also learning about the impact that Erica's whiteness had on the research. She explains how her desire to do the project arose from her racial identity, so in that sense, we see her identity creating impact on her project. We were hoping also to learn about the way the interviewees of color responded to Erica as well as how her research project may have changed the interviewees' relationship with their work environments. These two elements, in our perception, are underdeveloped or absent.

Regarding how interviewees of color responded to Erica, we imagined a lot more information like that supplied by Jessica, who extended herself to explain how Erica 'really didn't hear my response . . . [when] I said in my interview I

identify myself as a black woman. The two go hand-in-hand.' We found ourselves wondering how many interviewees might have been able to point out similarly instructive interactions, especially among the two-fifths of the sample who did not respond to the email request for feedback. Had Erica been able to collect authentic data from those non-responders, she probably would have had a more complex picture of how she presented and was received as a white person.

In her inquiry, Erica faces questions that we often pose to ourselves: 'How can we come to know what we don't know? How do we confront the inherent limits to knowability?'

In the context of our collective individual experiences of developing trusting relationships with people of color, one of the things that we have come to understand is how hard honest two-way communication is. White people fear making mistakes, as Erica points out and we have learned. We have also learned from our friends and colleagues of color how tired they become of trying to educate white people, even the most well meaning. When they do extend themselves to educate, they are wary about revealing too much, sensitive to strong taboos that prohibit revealing oneself or one's community to the white world.

From talking about the specific case of Erica's inquiry, our group moved into a more general discussion about how 'coming to know what we don't know' relates to validity in first-person research. In our own work, we frequently wonder whether we are lost in a self-serving discussion that we construct in order to burnish our image as 'good white people'. We live with the dilemma, 'How can we know what we don't know? In what ways are we blind to our ignorance?' In fact, when our school launched the project of multiple cooperative inquiries for white people, there were many skeptics who insisted that the project couldn't possibly succeed because white people need people of color in order to discover their hegemonic assumptions and practices. Although we strongly support the value of all-white inquiry groups, we also realize that our inquiry could not work as well as it does if we as individuals did not have many personal relationships with people of color who are willing to educate us about whiteness. When we come together as a group, what we have learned from those friends and colleagues infuses our group's knowledge making. They are, we realize, 'taking care' of us.

Regarding the second element of our expectation about learning how Erica's whiteness affected her research, we didn't see any information about how the project substantively changed her interviewees' relationship with their work environments. Our expectation was probably unrealistic, attributed to the fact that none of us knows what critical management theory is. Because we were enticed by the name to assume that it refers to some sort of critical theory approach, we were expecting a dialogic process with emancipatory intentions. Instead, Erica's project seems more a descriptive study cast in a constructivist paradigm. Admittedly, her dissertation research methodology is not the topic of

this first-person inquiry article. However, we are struck by a certain irony regarding whiteness. If the research purports itself to be emancipatory, yet in its execution turns out to be more traditional (that is, the researcher collects data *from* subjects but does not engage *with* them in creating change), then this paradigmatic misstep is a perfect mirror of the phenomenon that is part of what Helms calls the Pseudo-Independent stage – white people using people of color to educate themselves at the expense of the people of color. Erica also wonders about this possibility when she expresses her concern that 'people of color shouldn't have to take care of white people . . .'

Over our years of working together, we have struggled to stay in an inquiry mode. Each of us slips often and easily into a 'good white person' identity, smug with right answers.

Recently, we have used the phrase 'critical humility' to describe our struggle of 'staying in the inquiry', in contrast to adopting smug confidence that one has 'done the work' and therefore achieved the 'right' perceptions about whiteness, race, and dominating systems of power. One of our members explains the idea this way:

> My own visceral experience of Helms' model in my life is that progress along the continuum does not occur in a linear fashion. While I may have moments of living from Helms' 'autonomous' expanded consciousness, I also bounce around greatly to some of the earlier stages, depending on my emotional state, etc. This has been disconcerting for my white mind, which wants to accomplish the levels of awareness that Helms suggests, and put that test behind me. Unlike someone who might get a black belt in karate, I don't see the Helms' model as representing fixed levels of achievement. Although Helms' model is an important contribution, it suggests a one-way evolution that I have found to be oversimplified in the practice of this particular white life! This is where the humility comes in. I do need the courage to claim my voice and step up as a white person challenging racism *and* I need simultaneously to recognize that this is a lifelong process for me, where I will at times lose precious ground (perhaps back to Helms' Pseudo-Independence stage) and be hungry for affirmation from people of color that I am a 'good white person'. When I read Erica's description of Tien's remarks, Tien's words stopped me in my tracks. How to claim voice and remain open to such wisdom is a conundrum indeed!

When we tackled the challenge of writing this response, we set modeling critical humility or 'staying in the inquiry' as one of our goals. Have we managed to negotiate our way across the wobbly rocks without slipping too often? We don't know. In contrast to falling off real rocks, when we fall from metaphorical ones we often do not know that we are 'all wet' or caught in dangerous currents. How, in these moments of crafting our response, have we been unconsciously demonstrating our whiteness? Have we authentically claimed a voice on the subject of whiteness, or have we played the 'doubting game,' trying to pick apart another person's heartfelt inquiry? In what ways is our response relational, inviting

further inquiry and dialogue? How is it judgmental or dichotomous? We hope that we have expressed our sense of resonance in a way that invites resonance in others and that we have asked questions that invite further inquiry.

We are grateful for Erica's leadership and courage in writing about her inquiry into whiteness and for giving us an opportunity to join her in this public space.

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The European-American Collaborative Challenging Whiteness fosters research and learning about the subject of white consciousness. The use of collective authorship under the name of the Collaborative reflects our understanding of the way in which knowledge is constructed. Members came together originally through their association with a cultural consciousness project at the California Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco; members are: Carole Barlas, Elizabeth Kasl, Alec MacLeod, Doug Paxton, Penny Rosenwasser, and Linda Sartor. Past member Roberta Kyle is an important contributor to our knowledge construction. Inquiries about the Collaborative's work can be addressed to any member via email: collaborative@eccw.org. Find further information at our website: http://www.iconoclastic.net/eccw/ *Address*: c/o Alec MacLeod, Associate Professor, California Institute of Integral Studies, 1453 Mission Street, San Francisco, CA 94103, USA. [*Email*: collaborative@eccw.org]