

Critical Humility in Transformative Learning when Self-identity is at Stake

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Abstract: Critical humility can help to facilitate transformative learning when deeply held beliefs about self-identity are at stake. Author formulates questions that assist learners in reflecting critically about issues that affect the practice of critical humility. These questions focus on self-identity, privilege, purpose of actions, and quality of self-reflection.

Ignorance is not so much what you don't know as what you do know that isn't so.
(Irwin Miller, 1987)

Attempting to transform “our taken-for-granted frames of reference” into frames that are “more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 8) is especially challenging when the transformation involves deeply held beliefs about one's basic self-concept or identity. Sometimes that identity is so embedded in sociocultural influences that the person is completely unaware that his or her perceptions about the world are limited and partial. Often, in fact, forces in the dominating culture reinforce a person's belief system about what is normative and true. Sometimes, a person becomes aware of alternative perspectives and feels threatened by them. In reaction to perceived threat, people often respond defensively, as adult learning theorist Jack Mezirow explains: “When inadequate meaning schemes involve self-concept, we fill this void by compensation, projection, rationalization, or other forms of self-deception” (1991, p. 44). In both instances — either lack of awareness about alternative perspectives or defensive forms of self-deception in the face of new awareness — people embody the ignorance that Miller (1987) characterized, that is, they espouse and act upon what they think they know “that isn't so.”

Our group has pondered the challenge of discovering “what we know that isn't so” in the context of our inquiry about a topic that involves deeply held attachment to self-concepts and identity. We are a group of six white European Americans who, as individuals, are adult education practitioners in a variety of institutional and community settings. We have been together as an inquiry group since 1998, seeking to change our relationship to white hegemony and institutionalized racism. Not only are we trying to learn how to expand our daily awareness of hegemony and racism, we also hold ourselves accountable for acting in ways that challenge our own and others' participation in these systems.

Critical Humility: The Paradox of Knowing and Not Knowing

In the context of our inquiry, we have identified a quality of being that we call *critical humility*. The purpose of this paper is to share our ideas about this quality of being. First, we discuss critical humility as an aid in learning new attitudes and behaviors when self-identity is at stake. Second, we share our ideas about how critical humility can be fostered by reflecting on a number of questions that we offer as guidelines for practice.

We define critical humility as the practice of remaining open to discovering that our knowledge is partial and evolving while at the same time being committed and confident about our knowledge and action in the world. The two parts of this definition capture the paradox with which we struggle. If we are to hold ourselves accountable for acting, we must have confidence that our knowledge is valid enough to shape actions that are appropriate. At the same time, knowing that our knowledge is distorted by hegemony and possible self-deception, we need to be on constant alert about limits to the validity of our knowing.

Critical Humility in the Context of Our Inquiry about White Hegemony and Racism

Although we have an intuitive hunch that the concept of critical humility may be relevant in multiple contexts, we acknowledge that our ideas about the phenomenon are grounded in the context of our own inquiry. We therefore offer a brief description of our work as an inquiry group.

We came together as a cooperative inquiry group in order to inquire into the impact of white supremacist consciousness on our personal beliefs and actions. Cooperative inquiry is an action research strategy that small groups of people use to guide themselves in learning from their personal experience about a topic of mutual interest. The method is based on multiple cycles of action and reflection and

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employs systematic validity procedures (European American Collaborative Challenging Whiteness, 2002; Heron, 1996).

Our evolving ideas about critical humility are based on our seven-year engagement examining white supremacist consciousness, a term we adopt from scholars of color (Delgado, 1995). Though the term “white supremacist consciousness” implies a focus on race, we see it as a system of thought that permeates all realms of behavior by people who view the world through its frame (Ani, 1994). Aspects of this consciousness — such as dualistic thinking, the privileging of the individual, and the presumption that white values are universal — manifest in all aspects of US society, from the treatment of the environment to efforts to transplant U.S. style democracy to other cultures (Paxton, 2003).

In the context of our group’s inquiry, critical humility means that we hold ourselves accountable for providing leadership in dismantling the hegemonic oppressiveness of whiteness while at the same time being actively aware that our ability to lead transformative change is limited by the same meaning perspective that we seek to change. Once in awhile we glimpse that meaning perspective with enough detachment that we are able to see our struggle to stay in an inquiry mode — when we are tempted toward unwarranted self-assurance that we have mastered “correct” perceptions about whiteness, race, and dominating systems of power, or, conversely, when we are tempted toward hopelessness about our ability to transform white supremacist consciousness. We adopted the phrase “critical humility” (European American Collaborative Challenging Whiteness, 2005a, 2005b) to conceptualize the capacity we are striving to develop. Learning to live with paradox and ambiguity is an important part of critical humility. One of our group’s opportunities to practice living in paradox is our effort to follow the guidance of African-American poet Pat Parker. She explains to “the white person who wants to know how to be my friend” that the first task is to forget she is black and the second task is to never forget she is black (Parker, 1990).

Critical Humility and Transformative Learning

We believe that the cultivation of critical humility helps a transformative educator or co-learner talk to others in a way that invites openness and allows transformative learning to occur. Because transformation related to core identity typically creates great discomfort and disorientation, learners are particularly vulnerable to self-delusion, avoidance or denial. Comfortable illusions provided by hegemony obscure avoidance and denial. At the same time, the negative impact of denial and self-delusion is increased when the learner’s identity is rooted in a dominant perspective, as in the case of white or male privilege. When employed by learners, critical humility supports opening to transformation and emotional discomfort in ways that enable learners to engage in critical reflection about self-identity.

With a hunch that critical humility may be relevant to other inquiries that put self-concept at risk, we tentatively suggest the importance of intentionally cultivating this quality of being. We understand that we have not discovered anything new with our conceptualization of critical humility. Though the concept of critical humility has not been clearly articulated in transformative learning theory, we believe many others have experienced what we seek to describe. In writing about critical humility in relationship to transformative learning theory, we recognize a number of theories with resonant qualities.

For example, the Buddhist concept of “beginner’s mind” provides insight into how humility is brought into critical humility. As adult education practitioners, we can and should be tenacious and emotionally attached to the promotion of what we know and believe; at the same time, to facilitate transformative learning and research that challenges our deepest meaning perspectives, we find that it is also important to bring a spirit of openness and non-attachment to our work. Our expectations and our egoic attachment to outcomes can block creativity and experiences that lead to transformation. As the late Buddhist scholar and meditation master Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche explains, “the point is to open up so that instead of trying to define and control, to...make what's going on around you fit to the filters of your ego, your defense... let the events of the world flow through you and to watch them, thoughtfully so that they are not occluded by the anxious effort to react with opinion. This is the path of a child's beginner's mind” (p. 10, 1973). The ego “filters” described by Trungpa correspond to the habits of mind and habits of being described in transformative learning. About beginner’s mind, Zen Master Shunryu Suzuki adds that, “All self-centered thoughts limit our vast mind. When we have no thought of achievement, no thought of self, we are true beginners. Then we can really learn something. The beginner's mind is the mind of compassion. When our mind is compassionate, it is boundless” (p. 21, 1970). Compassion for self and others has been a repeated learning and constant guide as we have engaged in our inquiry into white supremacist consciousness.

Because critical humility requires capacity for paradoxical thinking, theories describing the development of cognitive complexity are useful in thinking about how to develop critical humility. Although we recognize that they are culture-bound, there are many developmental models describing various dimensions of intellectual functioning, all of which move along a continuum from relative simplicity to greater complexity. One of the first of these (Perry, 1970) became the stimulus for many particular applications (Kohlberg, 1981; Gilligan, 1982; Belenky et.al., 1986; Kegan, 1994). In William Perry's model, which describes three developmental stages of intellectual development, the person moves from dualism through multiplicity to relativism. The underlying assumption in the epistemological position of dualism is that there is one "true" reality and that in order to know what is true, one depends on authority or expert knowledge. The epistemology of multiplicity honors subjectivity and is often characterized with the statement, "Everyone is entitled to her own opinion." The epistemology of relativism requires the person to recognize that knowledge has multiple valid constructions. In the most developed stage in Perry's theory, called "relativism with commitment," the person acknowledges that although there are multiple constructions of reality, he or she is ready to make a commitment to one particular construction, which he or she will defend as being more valuable than others. This developmental stage, relativism with commitment, is an epistemological stage that would be most conducive to the exercise of critical humility.

Guiding Questions to Promote Critical Humility

We have devised sets of questions designed to assist learners with reflection about the issues that seem most salient to us when a learner seeks to exercise critical humility while communicating about an issue that challenges self-identity. The questions in our guidelines are intended to help teachers and learners first to identify and then to explore factors that are most likely to confound their efforts to be both committed to insights gained from transformative learning and at the same time open to learning more when self-identity is at stake. As a whole, the questions seek to focus attention in three related realms: behavioral, cognitive and affective. The specific questions guide reflection about self-identity and values, the role of privilege, the purpose of the inquiry, and the self-reflective process. When using these guiding questions for our own inquiries, we have found that critically self-reflective answers can be remarkably difficult without the support of others. As Mezirow has suggested in his discussion of critical reflection, these questions can be most helpfully approached and resolved in interaction with co-learners and others willing to provide feedback. After presenting the guiding questions, we describe in further detail the advantages of working in groups when confronting issues related to transformation of self-identity.

These guidelines are useful both for examining one's own beliefs and practices as well as for engaging others in examining theirs. We believe that applications of critical humility can range from the institutional/systemic level, when one seeks to influence the leadership of an organization or community, to the individual level, when one wants to increase personal capacity in a particular area (e.g., anti-racism advocacy, teaching, or team leadership).

To assist the reader with imagining how to apply the questions in our guidelines, we set the stage with an example from our own experience that we then use in illustrating the guiding questions. At our first cooperative inquiry meeting we talked about why each of us was interested in an inquiry about white supremacist consciousness. As we discussed our commitment to social justice efforts, it struck us that our efforts to be "good" and do "good work" seemed real, but they also led to a desire to distance ourselves from white people who either did not share our commitments or who did not know as much about race as we perceived ourselves to know. We began playfully to talk about "good white people" and "bad white people." This inadvertent conversation about self-identity caught our imagination. We had spent much of our professional lives thinking of ourselves as "good white people." We quickly realized the potent irony: in trying to minimize our own supremacist consciousness, we felt compelled to cast ourselves as superior (to other white people). We built our first cooperative inquiry action around this conversation: before our next meeting, we would each notice times when we felt like the "good white person" (European American Collaborative Challenging Whiteness, 2005b).

Our collective experience with seeking and wanting to be the "good white person" helps us identify the questions we have put in place as guidelines for practicing critical humility. We often notice that despite our growing sense of confidence that we are becoming knowledgeable about how to act in relation to white supremacist consciousness, we still catch ourselves unconsciously falling back into the same pattern of being with which we began our inquiry nearly eight years ago. When we notice ourselves lapsing into a "good white person" identity, we feel foolish because we thought that we had learned not to

do that. Practice of critical humility helps us pause to notice the lapse, but then to move forward with our commitments to think and behave differently.

I. *Self-identity and values*: The first questions can be the most difficult, but the most crucial for one's success.

- What are all of the self-identities that might be in operation and at risk in this situation? (e.g., competent teacher, understanding parent, “good” person, non-racist white person, loyal feminist, etc.) It can be surprising to see the variety of identities operating in a given situation. One way to help uncover the specific self-identity at risk is to ask questions like: Where do I feel threatened? What am I scared about? What attracts me in a situation, or how do I see myself as different from others in this situation? What is the identity label I seek to avoid?
- Spend time unpacking a particular self-identity. For example, in our group we explore concrete details about a good white person. What do they do? How would we know one when we see one?
- What is my role in this situation? Here it is helpful to step back and see yourself from the perspective of other identity groups. For example, if a white man is part of a group where everyone else is a woman or person of color, his role in that interaction includes being a representative of his group; this is not the case in a group of all white men in which he could then be an individual.
- What are the costs and benefits of changing self-identity? The costs of transforming self-identity can be high when we realize we don't know all that we thought we knew. How are these costs related to feelings of self-worth?
- How does the situation relate to my core values and beliefs about myself? How much stake do I have in the values being questioned? Are there competing or contradicting values or identities involved? How do I see the “moral high ground” in this situation?

II. *Role of Privilege*: Added to the complexity of understanding identity is a need to examine privilege in relationship to the particular situation. Although social location is important (for example, a white, male, heterosexual, Christian dominant location or a person of color, female, gay/lesbian, non-Christian subordinated location), the context of the situation must also be considered. It can either reinforce beliefs or bring them up for scrutiny, depending on the level of investment in particular identities present in the larger context. For example, the lone white man in a group of women and people of color (to which we refer in the preceding section) might feel like a minority in the context of that group, but the group's presence within a predominantly white organization would reinforce the white and male privilege, even when the man is the only white male in the group.

- What is the privilege operating in the situation? Is privilege based on race, class, religion, gender ethnicity, age, physical ability or sexual orientation operating?
- Acknowledging that we all have multiple identities, which ones become salient and operate at any given time? What privilege do I have in this situation? In what ways am I resisting perceiving myself in a dominant position? What is the possible role of privilege in my research or learning?
- Is the context indifferent to my identity? Does the context reinforce my identity or reject my identity? Which salient identities come into play given the context?

III. *Purpose*: After engaging the questions on self-identity, we invite the practitioner to reflect on the nature of the inquiry or purpose of the communication. We often find ourselves defaulting to a win/lose frame of reference in heated or conflictive situations. This dualistic default then overrides our best intentions or purposes.

- What is the phenomenon I wish to change?
- Is my purpose and strategy for participating in this inquiry or communication in alignment with my self-identity?
- To what extent is my purpose threatening the self-identity(ies) at stake?
- How might I be perpetuating the phenomenon I wish to change in this situation?

IV. *Self-Reflective Process*: The entire set of guidelines engages the learner in a self-reflective practice. The questions in this last section can be helpful if a learner is stuck or confused about the first three sets of questions. In our experience, feeling lost or confused as one addresses these questions is to be expected as

a part of the process. If transformative learning about one's self-identity were easy, none of these questions would be necessary. Educator and writer Judi Marshall (2004) explains,

[E]spousing self-reflection is a bold claim. If, as Bateson argues, the conscious self sees an unconsciously edited version of the world... "the whole of the mind could not be reported in a part of the mind" (1973, p. 408), we cannot know everything through rational intelligence and must accept incompleteness. (p. 305)

The following questions are designed to help inquirers get an expanded perspective on their communication skills with regard to their purpose, while also acknowledging the impossibility of the task of seeing the whole:

- To what extent have I disclosed (am I disclosing) myself and thus, letting myself be vulnerable to new learning?
- To what extent have I perpetuated (am I perpetuating) the very phenomena I seek to change?
- How am I similar to that which I am criticizing?
- Can I catch a glimpse of what I didn't know that I didn't know?
- Do I truly believe that I don't hold all of the answers? How is my information incomplete? What do I not know?
- In what dichotomies am I caught?
- How patient am I with myself about being wrong?

Strategies for Implementation:

Transformation of self-identity is an ongoing process, not an end to be achieved. The ability to stay with an inquiry is vital. We have found that one of the best strategies for "staying in the inquiry" is to do transformative work as part of a learning community. In the context of our inquiry into emotionally provocative identity issues, we have identified five behaviors, described below, that are supported by participation in cooperative inquiry. Deepening capacity to engage in these behaviors enhances the integrity of insights achieved when working alone and thus may enhance the self-reflective process suggested above.

Living in the inquiry is difficult when the inquiry challenges one's core sense of identity. Being accountable to a group not only heightens day-to-day awareness of the inquiry topic but also counteracts natural inclination to avoid or repress it. *Practicing new behaviors, recognizing when one fails to practice desired behavior, and unlearning habituated behaviors* is a high-stakes enterprise. Group members help one another detect gaps between values and actions that may be invisible to the individual participant. The group also provides a safe place to practice new behaviors. *Reflecting-in-action* (Schön, 1987) is a necessary skill when confronting situations that continually challenge identity and is enhanced with regular conscious engagement in the practice within a group. *Conceptualizing new learning* about one's identity is enhanced by access to multiple perspectives. Inquiry groups that stay together over time also develop new language and metaphors that encode the complexity of their conversations and make meaning more accessible to members. *Staying present to a range of emotional responses, including disorientation, vulnerability, anger and grief* is difficult, particularly when self-concept is at stake. Inquiry groups provide support for facing emotional challenges and for legitimating emotional knowledge. These five interrelated behaviors together contribute to the inquirer's ability to pursue with greater integrity topics that challenge self-concept (European-American Collaborative Challenging Whiteness, 2005b, pp. 249-250).

In [Tentative] Conclusion

We see critical humility as being more than a practice. We see it as being a "habit of mind" (Mezirow, 2000) or "habit of being" (Yorks & Kasl, 2002) that helps adult learners cope with increasing complexity, ambiguity and uncertainty as they undertake personal and organizational transformation. Processes that can precipitate transformative learning such as rational discourse and critical reflection (Mezirow, 1991, 2000) are more likely to come to transformative fruition if engaged within an internalized habit of critical humility. We believe that developing capacity to embody critical humility helps us discover the chasms between our espoused values and our actions in the world, explore and learn from them, and move toward more congruent action.

Our guidelines are a work in progress that we are developing out of our own experiences as European Americans inquiring into the impact of white supremacist consciousness on our personal beliefs and actions. We are presenting a set of questions and expect that there are many more that could be asked. Meaning perspectives or habits of being as fundamental as a person's cultural and racial identities are not easily identified, examined, or transformed. Conscious attention to critical humility can assist learners in

challenging invisible assumptions, distorted meaning perspectives and outdated habits of being. As adult educators, our ability to foster critical humility in the lives of our students can provide much-needed support for engaging in learning that is transformational. Perhaps even more significant is questioning how we bring critical humility to our own inquiries and lives, where we are expected to be experts with answers. As Suzuki (1970) reminds us, "In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities; in the expert's mind there are few" (p. 21).

Note

1. The European-American Collaborative Challenging Whiteness fosters research and learning about White Supremacist Consciousness. Collective authorship under one name reflects our understanding of the way knowledge is constructed. Members came together originally through 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. Inquiries are welcome via email: collaborative@eccw.org

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