The Handbook of Race and Adult Education

A RESOURCE FOR DIALOGUE ON RACISM

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White on White

Developing Capacity to Communicate About Race with Critical Humility

EUROPEAN-AMERICAN COLLABORATIVE CHALLENGING WHITENESS

Our intent in this chapter is to explore how White people might avoid putting each other on the defensive when talking about race, racism, and White privilege. We describe a dialogic practice called critical humility that helps us have more fruitful conversations about these issues.

The European-American Collaborative Challenging Whiteness fosters research and learning about the subject of racism and White privilege. Using a group name to designate collective authorship reflects the collaborative members' understanding of the way in which knowledge is constructed. The members of the collaborative 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 about the collaborative's work may be addressed to any member via e-mail: collaborative@eccw.org. Find further information at our Web site: http://www.iconoclastic.net/eccw.

We are a group of White adult educators who have been meeting monthly since 1998 to support each other in our mutual efforts to challenge hegemony and institutionalized racism. Others at times have viewed as problematic our decision to create a White-only inquiry group, with its echoes of segregation and the separate-but-equal policies that dominated the United States for the century following the Civil War. Questions are raised about whether members of a dominant group can learn about themselves in isolation, whether oppressive behaviors will remain invisible, or worse, be reinforced. Yet we have found that working together as White people on these issues has been intrinsic to our learning.

We hold the assumption that we who benefit from White skin privilege have a responsibility to confront racism in ourselves and in society. We also feel that White people need to find ways to engage questions about race with one another. Rather than relying solely on people of color to inform us about racism, we need to accept responsibility for and direct our own learning about racism as well. At the same time, each of us sees participating in our all-White group as a complement to, not a replacement for, learning in multicultural settings.

SHUTTING DOWN DIALOGUE BY PROSELYTIZING AND DISDAINING

By examining our own development as well-meaning, White adult educators, we have noticed behaviors that not only impede dialogue but also perpetuate White privilege. Two of these behaviors are proselytizing and disdaining. By *proselytizing* we mean exhorting in an officious and tiresome way. By *disdaining* we mean treating as less worthy and rejecting with aloof contempt or scorn. Our ideas about proselytizing and disdaining have been shaped by our experience of wanting both to be and to be perceived as being *good White people*—White people who act as effective allies to people of color by challenging the injustices of White hegemony and privilege. The irony is that this desire to be and to be seen as being a good White person often leads each of us to

behaviors that have the opposite effect of what we intend. Several things happen. At times we start thinking of ourselves as superior to other White people who "just don't get it." In our zeal to enlighten them, we end up proselytizing in ways that put them on the defensive or close down conversation altogether. At other times our desire to distance ourselves from the unenlightened White person can manifest as disdain. We are then blind to the ways in which we are similar to those to whom we feel superior.

Under such circumstances, we find that we are less open to new learning. Proselytizing and disdaining can be subtle. We may intend to communicate gentle compassion and sincere respect. However, if our words spring from the attitudes just described, the person(s) with whom we are interacting will probably feel patronized or defensive, or both.

CRITICAL HUMILITY AS A HABIT OF BEING THAT SUPPORTS REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Seeking an antidote to our own proselytizing and disdaining, our group evolved a concept that we call *critical humility*, which we see as a habit of being to which we aspire. Critical humility embodies a delicate and demanding balance of *speaking out* for social justice while at the same time *remaining aware that our knowledge is partial and evolving*. The two parts of this definition capture the paradox with which we struggle. If we are to hold ourselves accountable for speaking up, we must have confidence that our knowledge is sufficiently valid to support what we say. At the same time, we need to be constantly alert to how the validity of our knowledge is limited by the distortion of hegemony and self-deception. In other words, we hold ourselves accountable for striving toward being the good White person, while trying not to fall into the trap of thinking we have actually become that person.

We devised questions that help us reflect on what is underneath the ways we communicate (European-American Collaborative Challenging Whiteness, 2005). The questions, which appear in Exhibit 9.1, focus on three areas that can shed light on our efforts to embody critical

humility: self-identity and values, role of privilege, and purpose. A fourth set of questions helps us sharpen critical self-reflection. Ideally, the questions in Exhibit 9.1, which appears on pages 150–152, would be used to guide reflection-*in*-action. However ideal this goal, we typically use the questions to guide our reflection-*on*-action, either prospectively when we plan for a difficult conversation or retrospectively when we analyze how a conversation went astray. (We credit our use of the terms *reflection-in-action* and *reflection-on-action* to Donald Schön, 1987.) The questions are derived from our experiences of helping each other unravel what went wrong when efforts to engage in dialogue about race or privilege did not have the outcome we intended.

TRYING TO REFLECT-IN-ACTION USING CRITICAL HUMILITY

We now illustrate how we have applied the questions in Exhibit 9.1, using the example of a group experience that we describe in three parts. First, Victoria tells the group about an occurrence in which she believes she failed her commitment to action. Instead of speaking up when she thought another White woman's comment was offensive to people of color in the room, she was silent. Second, we describe a role play in which Andrew and Daniel fail to get a satisfactory result when they try to model how Victoria might have embodied critical humility. Third, we show how our group used some of the guiding questions from Exhibit 9.1 to better understand why our communications came across the way they did.

Victoria Describes Her Perceived Failure

One of our group's practices is to reserve time at our monthly meetings for members to bring up issues or incidents for group reflection and feedback. Victoria was eager to seek the group's reflection regarding an incident at a professional conference she had recently attended. She explained it this way:

> I attended a roundtable about race and racism convened by three colleagues of color. About twenty people came, mostly women, evenly divided as people of color and White people. During the

introductions, a White woman smiled brightly as she swept her eyes around the circle, saying, "I have always believed that I was meant to have been born Black."

I was thrown into one of those moments of confusion when, as a White person, I thought I should say something. I was embarrassed by what I thought was her lack of sensitivity—she spoke so lightly about giving up White skin privilege.

I noticed that the White woman had turned away from the circle so that she now spoke directly to the African American woman sitting next to her, apparently seeking approval or connection. I was struggling to figure out what I should say when the introduction process moved on and the moment passed.

Andrew and Daniel Attempt to Apply Critical Humility

Our group decided to role-play how Victoria might have responded. Victoria would play the White woman who said she should have been born Black. Andrew and Daniel would experiment with what Victoria might have said. Andrew now takes up the narrative:

Before we started the role play with Victoria, Daniel and I talked it over. We agreed that it would probably be best to approach the woman privately after the roundtable adjourned. We did not want to put her on the spot publicly and we also wanted to be sensitive about not disrupting the event. I tried first.

I tapped Victoria on the shoulder and said, "Excuse me. Could we talk a moment about the roundtable?" When she agreed, I went on, "When I heard you introduce yourself, saying that you felt you were meant to be born Black, I have to confess that I felt uncomfortable. I know I have said that kind of thing out of the best intentions, but over the years I have found that the impact on people of color hasn't always been very positive. Would you be open to talking about another interpretation?"

While I tried to engage Victoria in discussion, I found myself feeling less and less effective. The more I said, the more she seemed to

withdraw. Finally, looking for help, I turned to Daniel. I don't remember what he said, though I can vividly recall the response. Although his tone was compassionate, Victoria became increasingly silent. Clearly, our strategies had silenced Victoria rather than opening up dialogue.

REFLECTING ON THE ATTEMPTS TO APPLY CRITICAL HUMILITY

After the role play, group members reentered the conversation as themselves as we all tried to learn how to improve our communication with other White people about racism and privilege. Louise had been witnessing the interaction, and she reflected on it to Andrew and Daniel:

> I felt that instead of staying with your own experience and struggle, you had your attention on trying to change Victoria. Even though you were trying to be humble, you still seemed to be trying to show her how she was wrong. It sounded patronizing to me.

We all acknowledged how ironic it seemed that we had entered this role play in order to try out our ideas about critical humility, and instead, we created another example of being critical without humility. To help us understand what happened, we used our guiding questions displayed in Exhibit 9.1 to probe the experience.

EXHIBIT 9.1. QUESTIONS TO GUIDE THE PRACTICE OF CRITICAL HUMILITY

1. Self-Identity and Values
- What are all the self-identities that might be operating and at risk in this situation (for example, competent teacher, understanding parent, good person, antiracist ally, and so forth)? Are there competing or contradicting values or identities involved?

- Where do I feel threatened? What am I scared about?

- What attracts me in this situation?

- What is the identity label I seek to avoid? How do I see myself as different from others in this situation?

- What are the costs and benefits of changing self-identity? How are these costs related to feelings of self-worth?

2. Role of Privilege

- What privilege is operating in the situation? Acknowledging that we all have multiple identities, which ones are salient here?

- In what ways am I resisting perceiving myself as in a dominant position?

- Is the context indifferent to my identity? Does it reinforce or reject my identity?

3. Purpose

- What is the phenomenon I wish to change?

- To what extent is my purpose aligning with or threatening one or more of my self-identities?

- How might I be perpetuating the phenomenon I wish to change in this situation?

4. Self-Reflective Process

- To what extent have I disclosed myself, allowed myself to be vulnerable to new learning?

- 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?

(continued)

- Do I truly believe that I don't hold all the answers? How is my information incomplete?

- How patient am I with myself about being wrong? How compassionate?

Source: Adapted from European-American Collaborative Challenging Whiteness, 2005.

Beginning with the questions that appear in section 1 of Exhibit 9.1, we asked Andrew to reflect on what aspects of his self-identity and values he felt were important to him in the interaction. He noted that being a good White person who is a strong ally to people of color was the most important identity he had at stake. In situations like the one we role-played, his fear is that he will silence himself and not speak up. He explained: "In most areas of my life, I don't tend to think that being right is all that important. But in this area, I cling to the hope of being right. In fact, I have a strong *need* to be right." Victoria asked, "Why is that?" and Andrew continued:

> I think I feel the need to speak up because the stakes are so high. Learning how our society can better communicate across difference is one of our most crucial questions and I cannot be neutral on this. I need to take a position even if I may not be right. I have to counteract the silence that perpetuates the issue. Throughout history, horrible things have happened because the people who have the power to change things don't speak up. Silence is collusion.

This example illustrates critical humility's dual challenge. Victoria had not spoken in the roundtable situation because she lacked confidence about saying the right thing. Andrew took action, but fell into the trap of proselytizing. Both reactions impoverish dialogue and impede relationship.

Our group then queried Daniel on the identities he had at stake. He offered a general reflection about relationships.

> You know how African Americans often refer to each other as "brother" or "sister"? It's a way of saying something about their connection and what they have in common. I realize that when I get into a situation like the one in the role play, I'm not thinking that person is my brother or my sister. I find myself wanting to correct them and to show them what is right, not build a relationship with them.

We sighed in mutual recognition of how caught we can get in being right and how that distances us from others, especially people whom we see as being less conscious of White hegemony than we perceive ourselves to be. *Good White person* is a label we have used over the years as a sort of verbal shorthand that testifies to a moment of recognition, "Oh, there I go again, being the good White person." Even though we have all gotten better at seeing that we have fallen into this trap, we still struggle with how to get out of it. In the role play, Andrew's and Daniel's encounters with Victoria left her feeling confused and defensive. If her character in the role play learned anything from the interactions, it might have been to take fewer risks and be more guarded in her discussions of race. In our real lives that is not what we want to evoke through our communications.

Continuing with our examination of the role play, we used our guiding questions for the self-reflective process (Exhibit 9.1, section 4). Asking, "To what extent have I disclosed myself?" Andrew described how he often engages in false disclosure:

> I realize I often try to make a connection with someone by telling a story on myself. I might say something like, "I realize that sometimes I've said something very similar to what you just said." I create what amounts to a false Socratic dialogue, trying to set someone up to see my point of view. I'm invested in being a nice guy, so I fall into a strategy of false disclosure and do it all in the guise of "helping." My

approach is actually a false humility, calculated to demonstrate my superiority. It would be more honest to say, "I'm really offended by what you said. Would you like to know why?" But even if she said yes, I might still go on in a way that is patronizing. Whichever way I acted, either as I did in the role play or telling her straight out that I was offended, the main thing that is missing is my own genuine vulnerability.

Andrew's failure to reveal the limits of his own knowledge reflects his investment both in knowing what is right and in his identity as a teacher. He feels compelled to teach others what he believes he knows, and he is not open and vulnerable to new learning because he has cast himself as the expert rather than embracing an identity as a learner.

Daniel used the question, "How am I similar to that which I am criticizing?" to discover a need that had been unconscious. He notices:

In a situation like this, I am more likely to put my attention on protecting the feelings of people of color than to focus on the White woman. I guess what I really want is to get the approval of people of color for being on their side. I see that tendency as a reenactment of what the White woman in this scenario did when she looked only at the Black woman next to her after she said she wanted to be Black, which we interpreted as *her* desire for approval.

In this way, Daniel saw how he perpetuates the very phenomenon he wants to change—a White person looking to a person of color for approval.

One important element that becomes apparent in Daniel's and Andrew's reflections is that multiple identities can be operating at any given moment. Another is that noticing what we desire to change in others can help us discover what we do not accept about ourselves. As we concluded our discussion, Victoria observed:

I don't remember what Andrew and Daniel said to me, but I can still feel the condescension. I felt terribly misunderstood, and quite affronted that they were making unfair assumptions about me.

They never asked me why I said that I thought I should have been born Black.

With this comment about Andrew and Daniel, Victoria saw herself. In the original situation she had assumed she knew why the woman said what she said, and did not even consider asking her why she said that. After playing the part of that person and feeling what it was like to be judged harshly based on someone else's assumption, that mistake was painfully obvious. Victoria then reflected on how *White* it is to believe one's assumptions to be the truth, and thus she experienced a new insight about humility.

REACHING FOR A NEW WAY OF BEING

As White people confronted with issues of race and racism, we must not collude with silence. We need to speak up and challenge racism, and still acknowledge the limits of our own perspectives and consciousness. To engage another with criticality, we need to find a place of genuine care and compassion for that other person and ourselves, remembering we have something to learn. To engage with humility, we need to be emotionally authentic and actively promote dialogue. The example in this chapter reminds us how easily we fall back on polarizing bad habits. Though critical humility can be seen as a difficult paradox, we see the power and possibility of integrating this less dualistic practice into our lives. Although there is no formula for what to say, there is an attitude to cultivate. There are also ways to prepare for challenging moments of interaction.

Critical humility is not a destination. It is the process of reaching for a new way of being, a work in progress, a practice. Striving on a daily basis to take actions that challenge racism and White hegemony, we also strive to remember that even as we challenge White privilege, we are still immersed in it. Remaining open to discovering the insidiousness of our *un*consciousness is an ongoing challenge. Over our years of working together, we have struggled to stay in an inquiry mode that avoids the

smug sense of confidence that we have "done the work" and therefore achieved the "right" perceptions about Whiteness, race, and dominating systems of power. Yet each of us still slips easily.

Our intent here has been to demonstrate how we have used a set of guiding questions to learn from our experience as we attempt to act from a place of critical humility. In this context, we often focus on analyzing what went wrong when our efforts to practice critical humility fell short. Lest it appear that we see ourselves as failures or that engaging in this practice is too difficult, we point to the success we felt recently when we led an all-day institute at an annual conference on White privilege. After spending the day with us and learning about the practice of critical humility, our workshop participants remarked that we consistently seemed able to walk our talk. Because the program indicated the workshop was designed for White people, almost all of the participants were White. Their feedback reassured us that to some extent we are learning how to talk to other White people about issues of race from a place of critical humility.

Our discussion in this chapter was limited to our talking about applying critical humility to racism and White privilege. We are mindful that there are also issues of gender and class at play in our example that we did not have the space to discuss. Furthermore, we perceive the practice of critical humility to be useful beyond the challenges of avoiding proselytizing and disdaining—the two behaviors explored here. The guiding questions that support the practice of critical humility may be relevant for a variety of other applications, particularly for engaging with multicultural groups and in cross-difference interactions. Wherever we apply it, striving to develop our capacity to embody critical humility helps us to discover the chasms between our espoused values and our actual communications and to move toward more congruent communication.

In reflecting on how our chapter interfaces with others in this section, we see several connections. Our description of proselytizing and disdaining illustrates the "need to be right" that Doug identifies as part of the dualism in White epistemology. We often use Frankenberg's model,

described by Lisa, to explain that critical humility helps deepen capacities for race cognizance. We join Elaine Manglitz and Ronald Cervero in trying to learn from reflecting critically on our lived experience.

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