What's It Like to Be White?: Understanding the Decision to Learn About Being White

Marguerite A. Welch
Saint Mary's College of California, USA

Abstract: As a dominant social identity, whiteness is often not visible to white people. Developing a nuanced understanding of whiteness, including the systemic nature of white supremacy, is essential for white adult educators who want to create inclusive learning environments.

Introduction

Despite many claims, it is clear that we are not living in a post-racial society. The problem we face is that vast numbers of white people do not see racial issues and racial conflict as something that needs their attention. President Obama's (2013) call for soul-searching and for conversations in families, churches, and workplaces requires that white people increase their capacity to talk about racism and privilege.

To engage much larger numbers of white people in a national conversation about race, more white people must decide to learn what being white means to them and how their white identity impacts their relationship to the larger social systems in the United States. Few white people see themselves as racialized. They do not notice that what they perceive as normative for people in general may actually represent a cultural norm associated with their race; they are unaware of possible distortion in their meaning perspectives when they equate cultural difference in the racial other with cultural deficiency. Further, when white people think about race, their focus is frequently on the racial other, which means they do not see their relationship to whiteness as something they should study. For white adult educators, understanding their relationship to whiteness is essential to creating inclusive learning environments.

In many ways my selection of this topic is self-serving. As a white woman I want more white people with whom I can talk about whiteness and take action to create more inclusive communities. The concept of critical humility (ECCW, 2005a) has helped me forge ahead, knowing that I know enough to proceed, that I will learn along the way what I do not know, and that there will always be more I do not know.

Theoretical Framework

Learning about being white and integrating that learning into a person's day-to-day activities requires a shift in consciousness that is transformative. The theoretical frame for this study draws on five prominent approaches to transformative learning: the cognitive/rational approach (Mezirow, 1991, 2000); the imaginal/affective approach (Boyd & Myers, 1988; Dirkx, 2001a); the holistic approach (Kasl & Yorks, 2012); the constructive-developmental approach (Kegan, 1994), and the emancipatory/critical theory approach (Brookfield, 2012). These five approaches each offer practices that evoke or support transformation. In particular, Kasl and Yorks (2012) conceptualize transformative learning as a "change in *habit of being* [italics in original]—a holistic relationship to one's world experience through coherence among one's multiple ways of knowing" (p. 507). These multiple ways of knowing form an extended

epistemology (Heron, 1992) which "grounds learning in deeply contemplated lived experience. . . . [leading to] an intuitive grasp of significant patterns in lived experience" (Kasl & Yorks, 2012, p. 509). A key point of transformative learning is that the changes experienced are long-lasting and significant, leading to new behaviors and ways of being in the world.

Through the exploration of meaning perspectives, the assumptions and expectations through which lived experience is filtered, white people can expand their understanding of whiteness. Examination of the biographical, historical and cultural contexts of lived experience provides a greater context for meaning-making and results in frames of reference that are more dependable, inclusive, differentiating, permeable and which can hold multiple perspectives.

Research Design

This basic interpretative study, with a life history data gathering process, examines the turning points in the participants' lives in response to the research question: "What evokes the decision to learn about being white?" Using purposeful sampling, I selected six white people recommended by people who had observed them taking action to interrupt whiteness. The group is diverse with respect to age, geography, gender, sexual orientation, and profession. I excluded people who are professional diversity trainers as I wanted to focus on people who have integrated their learning about being white into their day-to-day lives in ways that facilitate change in their environments and/or that model an expanded white consciousness.

Transformative learning theory strongly influenced the design of the data-gathering strategy, particularly the work of Dirkx (2001b, 2006) and Yorks and Kasl (2002). The data were gathered through two in-depth interviews. During the first interview participants created a visual representation of their experiences of whiteness which we used as a prompt for reviewing their life history in relation to the research question; during the second interview we reflected together on the story I created from the first interview. The visual representations and stories add to the richness of the study and provide an engaging description of the process of learning about being white.

I used NVivo software to assist me with the thematic data analysis. I conducted multiple member checks, first to ensure accuracy in the stories, and later to test the validity of my data analysis. Peer reviews of my analysis by six scholars, both people of color and white people, contribute to the validity of my report.

Findings

Thematic analysis reveals five key elements present in the participants' decision-making processes, which I describe below. Some common themes that contributed to the participants' readiness for learning are: their experiences of being the only white person, the ways their family talked or did not talk about race, their childhood experiences with people of color, and their membership in an oppressed group. Also significant were disruptions that were occurring in their lives as they began the decision-making process: leaving home, moving to a new area, starting a new job, starting a family, and coming out as a lesbian. The outcome of the decision-making process for each participant was a clear desire to continue to learn about his or her white identity, to take action to interrupt systems of privilege, and to deepen personal understanding of how a white identity is salient in today's world.

Five Key Elements

The five key elements are: an awareness that their connection to racial issues must include their whiteness, an emerging sense of accountability, relationships with people who

supported and advanced learning, the role of emotions and feelings in the decision-making process, and the acquisition of new knowledge for a deeper understanding of whiteness.

Personal connection. Several of the participants were actively engaged in anti-racism work. They thought of themselves as good white people who understood racism and were on the "right" side of the issue. Each experienced events that caused them to re-evaluate their thinking about racism and how they are connected to it. For Katherine this occurred as she became increasingly frustrated in her efforts to respond to racialized student grievances. She was beginning to realize, "I do not have enough analysis. . . . What I think I know isn't working, . . . I was afraid I was part of the problem and I didn't know . . . what to do about it." When Doug, a black man who was also a professor at the school where she taught, said, "I don't think you are racist" when he clearly did think so, Katherine responded, "well, you know, I may be. I think I'm going to try to figure this out."

Accountability. As the participants described how they began to see and understand their identity as a white person they also expressed a sense of accountability to the people with whom they interacted in their social networks. When Steve was a volunteer at UYA, an organization that took inner city youth on wilderness trips, there were no conversations about race among the volunteers and staff. Steve found himself completely unprepared for some of the conversations he had with youth on the trips. When he because the executive director of the organization he met with a local agency that supports youth. He encountered anger and skepticism and learned that the executive director considered the leaders and volunteers of his organization, who were all white, "dangerous to her kids," and believed that UYA existed to make white people feel good about themselves. As Steve left the meeting he realized that as a white person, he was part of the problem. He also realized that as the leader of UYA "it is my *obligation* to now actively learn about these issues. . . . As the leader of UYA it's not just my choice anymore to learn about this stuff, I have to learn about this stuff."

Relationships. Each participant described relationships that were significant during their decision-making process. Many were with allies, the people with whom they talked about their feelings, learnings, curiosities, and discomforts. The allies had the participants' backs, gently nudged them into awareness, provided comfort during times of stress or anxiety, or otherwise provided support as the participants entered the decision-making process. A second set of relationships included individuals I call catalysts; people who provoked or initiated an action or reaction in the participants that advanced their learning. The catalysts may have called the participant on their racism or pushed them for greater understanding of their oppressive actions.

Feelings. As white people begin to learn more about being white, they often experience shame and guilt; emotions that can lead to white people disengaging from racialized situations. Finding ways to move past these feelings is essential to learning about being white. Nicole's decision to learn about being white happened during a workshop. This was when she "really got it for the first time . . . that I was white." Nicole did not remember what Susan, a black woman in the workshop, was saying but she does know that she "was pretty blasé about whatever it was . . . and kind of glossing over our differences and saying sisterhood is powerful." The workshop facilitator helped Nicole see how she was dismissing Susan's experience and "how that came out of my whiteness and my assumption that I could understand her experience because we were both women." In her reflections on the workshop Nicole described "gradually moving from [feeling deeply ashamed] to feeling kind of euphoria; euphoria feels a little too strong a term, but to feeling kind of cleansed." Since deciding to learn, Nicole has "battled smugness in terms of being more compassionate of other white people when they don't see

things the same way I do." Rather than feeling superior and self-righteous, as she often did before her decision, she has come to "see that they are just me on a different day."

Acquiring new knowledge. As the participants entered the decision-making process, each actively engaged in conversations with allies, workshops, reading, and other activities to learn more about white privilege and racism. These activities helped them situate themselves within the system of racism.

Discussion

The most powerful learnings for the participants are recognizing that racism is not about the "other" and coming to understand that as a white person, they are personally and integrally embedded in racist structures. In their post-decision behaviors, the participants have become comfortable with engaging others—both white people and people of color—in conversations about racism, white supremacy, and white privilege. They each acknowledge that this is not an easy path, yet it is a path they feel compelled to travel. Nicole describes this learning as a "journey toward wholeness."

Good White Person Persona

Prior to deciding to learn about being white, the participants' relationships with people of color were primarily oriented towards "helping" racial others. Each held tightly to their good white person persona. Embedded in this perspective is a belief that racism is a terrible problem, something to fight against, and, most importantly, related to the "other" in a way that allows white people to distance themselves from racist acts and, perhaps more importantly, from the bad white people who commit them. (ECCW, 2005b). As white people begin to see how the good white person persona can be racist they experience disruption. Educators Joe Feagin and Karyn McKinney (2003) explain how for many white people it would

> likely be too disruptive of their self-concepts to accept the fact that they live in a very unfair and unmeritocratic society. If these whites admitted to themselves that significant black *disadvantages* [italics in original] existed, then, conversely, they would have to acknowledge that significant white *privileges* [italics in original] also exist. (p. 12)

As the intensity of the participants' experiences heightened it became difficult to maintain a good white person persona. Their growing realizations that their actions harmed people of color increasingly evoked strong feelings of anger, confusion, and shame. As they moved through these feelings and developed more compassion for themselves and others, they were able to see their location as white people in the system of white supremacy operating in the United States.

Systemic Nature of White Supremacy

Located at the center of a system of white hegemony, white people do not have to think about the systemic influences of whiteness. On the other hand, people located at the margins of a system of white hegemony must have a good analysis of the system to operate successfully, and regrettably, safely, within the system. All too often white people who do not have an understanding of the systemic nature of white supremacy enact behaviors that telegraph their expectation that others must conform to dominant norms.

While the participants in this study may not have made an explicit systems analysis of white supremacy, this did not stop them from noticing when they bumped up against white supremacy. The shifts in consciousness that allowed the participants to understand the systemic nature of whiteness can be viewed through Kegan's (1994) development theory of orders of consciousness, a critical theory lens (Brookfield, 2012), and as movement from an ethnocentric to an enthnorelative orientation (Bennett, 1993). Not only can they engage people

interpersonally around issues where whiteness is salient, they can also attend to the systemic level. Katherine's work in teaching law is an example of this. She actively seeks ways to bring race into her classroom discussions and assignments. The inclusion of her social identities on her syllabi has opened the door to generative conversations with her students.

The participants expanded understanding of the systemic nature of racism is reflected in a shift in accountability. During their decision-making processes the participants felt a sense of accountability to specific people (family, friends, colleagues, stakeholders). After they decided to learn about being white, the participants' sense of accountability widened to systems beyond their immediate spheres of influence. They could see the different elements of whiteness and make choices about how to work towards changing their communities. Understanding their sociocultural locations involved an increase in participants' understanding of how to challenge dominating ideology, uncover power, and contest hegemony (Brookfield, 2012).

Implications for Adult Education

This study contributes to the field of adult education in two areas. The first is how the data gathering approach provides path to deeper understanding of lived experience in ways that supports transformation. The second is that understanding dominant social identities and skillfully navigating these dynamics is often an ongoing learning process. Both are necessary capacities for adult educators who want to facilitate change in their environments and model an expanded white consciousness for other white people, and in particular with colleagues and learners.

Practices That Support Transformation

The data gathering approach of creating visual representations reveals deeply held beliefs and patterns of experiences. It can be used as a model for creating processes that facilitate white people's engagement in a decision to learn about being white. It was through understanding the patterns of their experiences that the participants were able to situate their experiences in the larger sociocultural context, identify paths toward taking action to interrupt white privilege, and identify systemic changes needed for more inclusive organizations/society.

Skillfully Navigating Sociocultural Dynamics

White supremacist consciousness is the internalization of white supremacy, the deeply buried unconscious beliefs and assumptions, that most inhibit white people's learning about being white. The deep structural shifts, conceptual reframing, and working through the feelings that arose during the decision-making process supported participants in constructing more dependable and inclusive perspectives. If transformative learning is to change a person's engagement in the world, opening new possibilities and perspectives, then understanding one's social and cultural location is essential. For white people this means understanding the many ways that white privilege facilitates their interactions with people and systems.

Conclusion

Classroom dynamics are influenced by the social identities of both learners and faculty. Understanding white people's process of learning about whiteness will help white adult educators examine their own relationship to whiteness and will help all educators work with the sociocultural dynamics present in their classrooms. The five key elements described in this paper provide a roadmap for engaging in self-reflection as well as for guiding learners through a process of developing a more nuanced understanding whiteness. The data gathering process and creative engagement with the participants' stories offer approaches that bring to light deeply held

beliefs and patterns of experience, which in turn help us understand how we might create larger processes that facilitate white people's engagement in a decision to learn about being white.

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