Breaking the Silence and Expanding the Discourse: Racioethnic Identity and Perceptions of Race Among People of the African Diaspora

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Abstract: Drawing from the postcolonial literature and using Afro-Caribbean people as a case example, this paper explores how colonialism and ethnicity influence perceptions of race and racism among people of the African Diaspora

Today it is an accepted premise that most Whites do not see racial discrimination as a widespread or deeply entrenched problem in predominantly white workplaces, schools, and public service agencies. According to Feagin and Sikes (1994), Whites look at matters of racial discrimination with detachment, whereas Blacks view racism in terms of their and their relatives' experiences in past and present encounters with White people. As a result, Blacks and Whites have different views about racial inequity and injustice. These oppositional views make it difficult for adult educators to facilitate authentic dialogues about race and its impact on adult learning and teaching. While there is emerging discussions of race in adult education (Colin & Preciphs, 1991; Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2000), it is no surprise that our discussions continue to take a binary approach, focusing on dialectical relationships between "Whites" and "Others."

Moreover, issues of race go beyond discourses between Whites and Others; they are inclusive of all races and within racial groups. As many post-colonial scholars have found, there is a distinct relationship between racial identity, ethnic identity, and perceptions of racial discrimination among people of the African Diaspora (Hall & Carter, 2006; Hunter, 2006; Waters, 1996). According to these scholars, one's perceptions of racial discrimination are determined by one's views of his or her race and ethnic identity. Therefore, even among Blacks in America, notions of race and racial discrimination vary within ethnic groups.

If we accept the view perceptions of race and racial discrimination varies among racioethnic groups, then it is incumbent upon us to broaden the discourse to include intergroup perceptions of race and racism as shaped by ethnic group identity and affiliations. Colin and Preciphs (1991) argue that for adult educators to practice in a multicultural society, we must develop an understanding on the influence of racism on our perceptual patterns as they relate to the teaching and learning process. As they noted, "an understanding of the role and importance of perceptual patterns must become an integral part of the educational process" (p. 62). Colin and Preciphs further define perceptual patterns as "one's views of the world based on mental images formulated from the standards and ideals of the individual's social reference group" (p. 63). The acquisition of perceptual patterns, therefore, must be understood from an historical, cultural, and geographical context. Similarly, any attempts at addressing racist ideologies and practices must begin with an understanding of how history and the politics of location work in the interest of privilege and power to transcend cultural, political, and textual borders in the practice of colonial hegemony (McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2001).

There is no doubt that Blacks in America are impacted by racism because racist ideologies rest on the assumption of shared internal attributes based on physical characteristics (Helms & Cook, 1999). However, Hunter (2006) suggests that for West Indian Blacks who

originate from countries where they were in the majority and were the primary holders of positions of power, confronting issues of discrimination in the US is a very complex issue.

Purpose and Motivation for the Exploration

The purpose of this concept paper is to explore how ethnicity and colonialism influence perceptions of race and racism among people of the African Diaspora, particularly among Anglophone West Indians. My motivation for this exploration stems from an ongoing desire to understand how early socialization as an Afro-Caribbean citizen during the colonial era influence one's views of race and race relations in white majority cultures. For many years after my arrival to the United States, I had difficulty identifying the color of racism, evidence that was often apparent to my African American friends. This is no surprise because one of the myths of my early socialization was that my destiny, my successes, or my failures were entirely up to me. I was socialized to believe that if I was identified early on as a bright student, worked hard enough, obeyed the rules, did not question authority, and remained "a good girl," then I would be OK and would find success as defined by colonial standards. . Such indoctrination led me to internalize that the negative experiences I encountered in public spaces were the result of something I did or failed to do, and it was up to me to change those experiences by doing the "right thing." Speaking of the myth with which West Indians were indoctrinated, Lamming (1995) notes, "it is akin to the nutritive function of milk which all sorts of men [women] receive at birth. It is *myth* as the source of spiritual foods absorbed, and learnt for exercise in the future. This *myth* begins in the West Indian from the earliest stages of his [her] education"(p 15).

The myth of equity based on individual efforts was soon shattered. In the US, I discovered that doing the right thing was not enough; it did not erase the fact that I was Black, and that some of my experiences in American society were the result of my race, and were, therefore, out of my control. The question, then, is "Why couldn't I see racism in its many manifestations?" To continue this exploration, I ask the following questions: (1) How does an imperialist indoctrination as a colonial subject influences one's worldviews on race and racism? (2) How do ethnicity and racial group identity influence one's perceptions of race and race relations in majority white societies? To explore these questions, I used Anglophone Caribbean immigrants as a case example and drew from the post colonial literature to broaden the discourse on race and racism beyond a binary concept of "White" and "Other."

Afro-Caribbean Identities and Perceptions of Race and Racism

Jones (1997) notes that racism has a systematic impact on people of the African Diaspora that is experienced personally, collectively, and culturally. As Black people, we have experienced enslavement, personal racism, and various forms of institutional racism. Although Blacks living in the United States are often assumed to be a homogenous group as a result of their shared physical characteristics, there is considerable variation in their ethnic origins and cultural orientations. Despite the common legacy of slavery, Blacks throughout the Diaspora have been impacted by differing sociopolitical histories (Hall & Carter, 2006; Helms & Cook, 1999; Hintzen, 2001) which may influence their views of race and its impact on everyday life. For many Black Caribbean immigrants, their arrival into the United States marks the first time they are asked to socially categorize themselves based on their physical characteristics and/or cultural heritage. Additionally, it is the first time that they are forced to view themselves as a Black minority and to internalize the stereotypical images that accompany such identification.

Moreover, findings from research on Caribbean Blacks in the US suggest that they have different views of racism that enable them to achieve academically and financially (Helms & Cook, 2009; Hunter, 2006; Waters, 1994; 1995). Waters theorized that West Indian Black immigrants' low perception of personal discrimination enable them to persevere while African Americans' perception of discrimination hinder their achievement in many areas. Hintzen (2001), however, caution us against making such claims, noting that there is very little evidence in support of Afro-Caribbean achievements over those of African Americans. What has been demonstrated very clearly in the literature is that West Indians, in general, do not want to be viewed from the same perspectives as American Blacks and many identify themselves through their ethnicity rather than through race (Hall & Carter, 2006; Waters, 1994; 1995). They identify as Afro-Caribbean, West Indian, or by their island of birth (Jamaican, Grenadian, Trinidadian) rather than being identified as African American. Hintzen (2001) and Waters (1999) suggest that their knowledge of the low social status of African Americans influences the importance that West Indians give to their ethnic group membership. By de-emphasizing race and emphasizing ethnicity, Afro-Caribbeans hope to minimize the stigma of being Black in a racist society.

This preference for ethnic identification is significant in understanding group perceptions of race and racism. In fact, Nasser (2003) quoted Robert Hall, a professor of African American studies as saying that some West Indian families discourage their children from playing with African Americans. Also, in my own research with Anglophone Caribbean immigrant women, I found similar attitudes. Several portrayed an attitude of Anglophone Caribbean superiority and African American inferiority in terms of cultural values and motivations for self-development.

Overall, evidence from the literature suggests that West Indians have different perceptions of racism and racial discrimination as a result of their cultural orientations. For example, Hunter's (2006) dissertation study on the perceptions of racial discrimination and collective self-esteem among African Americans and West Indian Americans found differences in perceptions among the two groups based on racial and ethnic identities. Similarly, Gaines, Ramkissoon, and Matthies (2003) conducted a study of Jamaicans in the US and found that the participants negotiated their understandings of race and racial discrimination based on their cultural orientations. They note that the differences in cultural socialization by one's ethnic group shape cultural orientation, which in turn influence perceptions of discrimination. What is also at play here is the impact of a colonial socialization on Afro-Caribbean ideologies and worldviews as they relate to issues of race and relations. It begs to explore the question, "How did a neocolonial education system influence perceptions of race and racism?"

Neocolonial Education and Imperialist Indoctrination

Racism in education is a process of cultural, intellectual, and physical violence which strips its targets of their dignity and dispossesses them of their culture and resources (Hickling-Hudson, 2004. Neocolonial education, through its majority exclusionary practices and the indoctrination of a minority to carry on the practices of imperialism, contribute to the devaluation of humankind. There is no question that a neo-colonial education contributes to low self-esteem among students by attacking their self-image and their identities. For example, Hickling-Hudson (2006) reported that when a Caribbean history curriculum was first introduced in the region in the 1960s, the textbooks and examination questions reflected a colonial interpretation. They were prepared by a group of scholars from the United Kingdom and the Caribbean who were thoroughly socialized in imperial history. As Lamming (1995) noted, "The West Indian education was imported in much the same way that flour and butter are imported

from Canada" (p. 15). It is to no surprise, then, that some questions on the examination required students to imagine that they were slave traders and were asked to write essays describing how they would organize the African slave trade, or from the viewpoint of sugar plantation owners, explaining how slaves would be used. As Hickling-Hudson observed, none asked students to take the viewpoint of the African majority.

That scenario is a representation of West Indian socialization within a colonial system of education. As a result of such indoctrination, the colonial subject learns to internalize success and human value with white identification. To both the Caribbean examiners and the examinees, the curriculum was not viewed as hegemonic. It was the world they lived in, it was the way they had been indoctrinated, and it was a world they unquestioningly accepted. James (1969) articulated these views quite eloquently when he said,

> It was only long years after that I understood the limitation on spirit, vision, and self-respect which imposed on us by the fact that our masters, our curriculum, our code of morals, everything began from the basis that Britain was the source of all light and leading, and our business was to admire, wonder, imitate, learn; our criterion for success was to have succeeded in approaching that distant ideal. (p. 30).

For the subjects who do not transform to a place where they can understand the impact of colonial doctrines on the spirit, vision, and self-respect, is it not possible for them to later become the colonizer, and since they were socialized with racist ideologies to become racist? I believe that it is possible and, hence, one of my positions as we explore race and racism in adult education through the lens of postcolonial discourse.

A View of Race and Racism through Postcolonial Discourse

From a postcolonial approach, racism and colonialism are seen as discursive practices. "That is to say, it tries to understand how individual and group identities are constructed in discourse, often in quite contradictory and changing ways, and how these constructions have operated hegemonically to legitimate inequalities" (Tikley, 1999, p. 611). Using a post-colonial framework, one can experience how the stereotypes of the non-European "Other" were constructed and the impact of imperial socialization on perceptions of race and racism. Additionally, this framework is relevant, not only for its impact on racist constructions on the colonized, but also on how they profoundly influenced the learning experiences of children in the imperial center (Tikley, 1999). It draws from the knowledges of indigenous and colonized peoples that have been suppressed and hidden by the hegemony of Eurocentric education (Spivak, 1995). As a result, Western educators must be privy to the knowledges and experiences of the postcolonial subject to understand their positionalities in terms of race and ethnicity and the educational histories they bring to the classroom.

Most importantly, educators must keep in mind that postcolonial subjects do not constitute a monolithic group and that ethnicities are varied and complex. Therefore, our conversations should not be limited to Europe's colonization and exploitation of its colonists. According to Tikly, "if we are to take account of the complexities of the postcolonial condition, then attention also needs to be given to how non-European elites defined by ethnicity, cast, class, and gender also legitimize their dominance over other groups through their control over education systems" (p. 612). Neocolonial education systems, by developing a minority of eligible students, provide clear examples of how these learning systems are used to promote an elitist regime to carry on the work of imperialism. Therefore, any discussion on race would be incomplete without an exploration of the role of imperialism on perceptions of race and racism.

Expanding the Discourse on Race and Racism in Adult Education

According to Young (2003), "post-colonialism seeks to change the way people think, the way they behave, to produce a more just and equitable relation between different peoples of the world"(p. 7). Using a post-colonial framework to conceptualize racism in adult education discourse is a key to helping students and educators explore education in a way that recognizes and situates colonized frames of thinking and behaving. The purpose is to advance alternate ways of theorizing racism to help recognize, explore, and disrupt internalized notions that may limit possibilities for moving beyond binary interpretations of race and racism. Racism, in my view is not limited to Whites and Others (This is not to minimize the oppressive forces of white hegemony). Instead, I share Tikly's (1999) view that people of color whom society has placed in positions of power and control can be racist to those whom society has deemed to be in minority positions. If this is the case, how do we facilitate authentic discussions about race and racism, keeping in mind the complexities of the multiethnic, multiracial, and multicultural identifications that shape our perceptions of these phenomena? Lavia (2006) suggests that we can do this with a curriculum for educational practice that has at its core, reflexivity and critical inquiry, similar to Brookfield's (2005) call for the critical practice of adult education.

Adult Education and the Practice of Critical Professionalism

As adult educators, we cannot afford to ignore the colonizing effects of globalization and imperialism and how they inform perceptions of race and race relations. Similarly, in order to understand the significance of perpetual patters, how they originate, and their impact on worldviews, a curriculum for educational practice that is seeped in reflexivity and critical inquiry is required—one that Lavia (2006) calls "a practice of critical professionalism." There must be serious efforts at professional development for adult educators, with a strong focus on social justice. Lavia argues that professional development cannot be divorced from social justice issues and Walker (1997) calls for "a form of professional development which involves a continuous shifting between trying to alter a social situation in ways which bring us closer to living out our democratic values and revisiting what ought to be done while simultaneously interrogating what we mean by social justice" (p. 411). The personal development that is being proposed is a deliberate practice of critical professionalism, grounded in critical consciousness, for a more authentic approach to racism in adult education.

As hooks (2003) has noted, critical consciousness emerges out of a commitment for change. It resides in the practice of cultural action for freedom. "It emerges from a perspective informed by post colonial awareness of the need to create justice in education" (hooks, 2003, p. 7). Moreover, Freire (1985) emphasizes that critical consciousness is brought about, not through an intellectual effort alone, but through praxis—through the authentic union of action and reflection (p. 87). Thus, it is not enough to identify problems of racism in adult education discourse, but to connect the theoretical understanding of racism with the practical approaches to addressing racist ideologies that have historically framed our worldviews. Adult education, therefore, requires professionals with the courage to challenge imperialistic indoctrination as well as the challenge to contest Eurocentric theories, curricula, and practice.

Therefore, I propose that we expand our discourse on race to include a more post-colonial discourse. According to Giroux, post-colonial discourse forces us to engage in a radical form of border crossing in order to reconstruct and participate in the lived experience of the oppressed. Becoming a border crosser who is engaged in authentic anti-racist dialogue with others calls for

the creation of a space where the perceptual patterns of social relations, ideologies, and practices that cause racism to be perpetuated can be challenged.

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