Rearticulating Whiteness: A Precursor to Difficult Dialogues on Race
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This article reviews findings from a related study of 15 White racial justice allies, which highlighted the importance of re-articulating a sense of Whiteness. The author explores how the rearticulated sense of Whiteness demonstrated by these students may assist others to mitigate some of the defense mechanism discussed in the Watt (2007) Privileged Identity Exploration Model.

Discussions, courses, and workshops on race and racism are ubiquitous in college settings. Racial identity has been thrust into the forefront on many college campuses (Giroux, 1997). Positive outcomes associated with these interventions require that students critically examine their race. Unfortunately, there have been few attempts to provide a language within which White youth can articulate their Whiteness without reference to their the common experience of racism and oppression, which makes it difficult for White students to view themselves as both White and antiracist at the same time (Eichstedt, 2001; Giroux). White college students therefore are increasingly aware of race, but lack the language to make sense of it or to engage in the types of difficult dialogues that are the focus of this special issue.

The purpose of this article is to examine how several White racial justice allies articulated their Whiteness, and explore how this understanding of Whiteness may assist educators in engaging White students in difficult dialogues. The term "Whiteness" represents an understanding of what it means to be White in contemporary society. Whiteness includes an articulation of "how their own identities have been shaped within a broader racist culture" (Giroux, 1997, p. 294) and assumes that Whites are privileged in this society based on their racial features. Findings from a related study (Reason, 2005) indicated that the linear, developmental understanding of Whiteness—as purported by some popular theories (e.g., Helms, 1995)—does not relate to students' sense of Whiteness. Rather, students in the study presented a discursive and dynamic understanding of Whiteness that is more in keeping with Whiteness as understood by critical race theorists (e.g., Giroux, 1997).

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Critical Race Theory and Whiteness: A Theoretical Framework

In response to concerns over stage-like and essentialist understandings of White racial identity development (WRI), critical race theorists have assumed a more discursive framework to conceptualize Whiteness. WRI development, from a critical race perspective, is no longer a straight path toward a final, idealized endpoint; rather critical race theorists call for a rearticulation of Whiteness that incorporates a constant internal battle to balance negative aspects of Whiteness (power and privilege) with some positive constructions of Whiteness (Eichstedt, 2001). Without rearticulating Whiteness, Whites are left to define themselves negatively (racist), by what they are against (*anti*-racist), or by what they are not (non-racial) (Thompson, 1996).

According to Thompson (1996), Whites must reject the essentialist assumption that there is one way to be a "good" White, embracing instead an understanding of Whiteness influenced by other identities such as class, sexuality, gender, and age. By incorporating multiple identities, Whites begin to recognize situations where they may be "outsiders" based on factors such as sexuality or gender, while still recognizing their insider status based on race. This sense of Whiteness is likely to be nuanced, complicated, and dynamic because it becomes informed by the multiple other identities an individual possesses (Giroux, 1997).

The understanding of Whiteness described above is grounded in the belief that race is a social construction which has no reality outside of the socio-historical context in which we live (Spickard, 1992). Accepting race as a social and political construction, however, must not imply that race does not exist. Racial categorization brings with it social, political, and economic consequences that are quite real. Race, as an assumed definitive system of categorization, has been used to sort people into groups, maintaining and extending the existing power differentials between groups of people (Spickard). In the American system, Whiteness is a position that carries with it political and social power (Frankenberg, 1993). Recognition of the power and privilege afforded to Whites based solely upon their perceived race is a necessary, but not sufficient, step to understanding Whiteness. Whiteness then is a position of structural advantage, a standpoint from which to look at oneself, others, and society, and a set of cultural practices assumed/labeled "American" or "normal" (Frankenberg).

Rearticulating Whiteness: Laying the Foundation for Difficult Dialogues

This article reviews the findings of a qualitative research project that explored participants' construction of Whiteness and its relationship to racial justice ally actions (Reason, Roosa, Millar, & Scales, 2005). This research highlighted the importance of a critical examination of Whiteness in the development of racial justice ally actions. The current exploration of the data is an attempt to more completely explicate Whiteness and its relationship to difficult dialogues around issues of race.

Fifteen White students, 12 women and 3 men, from a large predominantly White institution, were interviewed for approximately 60 minutes each. These respondents were identified for their active racial justice ally behaviors, including their willingness to engage in difficult dialogues. They had begun a process of examining and rearticulating their Whiteness, although they continued to struggle to make sense of their Whiteness and the role that race played in their lives. Respondents discussed a multi-layered process, with components that could be considered both intrapersonal and interpersonal. Respondents attempted to understand Whiteness and how it informed their senses of self, their relationships with others, and their worldviews. Because these findings have been fully developed elsewhere (Reason, 2005; Reason, Roosa Millar, & Scales, 2005), this article provides an overview of how these respondents understood their Whiteness, focusing more attention on the relationship between this sense of Whiteness and engaging in difficult dialogues.

The Intrapersonal

Respondents discussed a process by which they attempted to integrate a personal understanding of Whiteness that was dynamic and fluid, situational and relational. Rather than viewing race as discrete or primary, respondents struggled to make connections between Whiteness and other subjectivities they possessed (e.g., gender and class), particularly their political orientation. Many claimed an activist identity as part of their Whiteness. Although several respondents recognized White as "the color of my skin," unlike younger respondents from a previous study (Reason, Roosa Millar et al., 2005), these respondents moved past this understanding to one that was more complicated by incorporating multiple, overlapping subjectivities. Several female respondents, for example, discussed how their understanding of Whiteness intersected with an identity as a woman, a non-dominant identity status. One notable respondent also articulated how these subjectivities were informed by her socioeconomic history, which she considered "privileged."

Several respondents also revealed evidence of an ability to make sense of their personal construction of Whiteness within the context of White privilege. Within their narratives, these respondents also indicated their need to continuously reexamine their understanding of Whiteness. Anthony (all names are pseudonyms) provided the most poignant example; as a student leader, Anthony assumed a visible role in responding to a racist incident that occurred on campus. During our interview Anthony recounted a discussion with student leaders and an African American faculty advisor from the Black Student Union about the institutional response:

> At one point the faculty advisor started laying out the whole thing. And he got really nasty, very ugly ...and it just so happened that I was the sounding board, like it or not,...I was called out for being White—just because I'm White. Not because of that; it wasn't at me, but at my Whiteness. I'm convinced of that...I thought I knew what was right and what was wrong, and now I had no idea, because here was this person that just [verbally] assaulted me because I was White.

Anthony is referring to "Whiteness" in this context to mean his position in the dominant ideology of society. Anthony discusses his ability to weather an affront by the faculty advisor and learn from it. Although he was hurt by the attack, Anthony did not resist engaging in this difficult dialogue. Rather he took the opportunity to reflect on what this experience meant through his racialized lens, sharing later in our interview how he had struggled to make sense of his feelings about this incident through conversations with a trusted mentor.

The Interpersonal

Respondents to this study examined their relationships and opinions about social policy through a lens that incorporated their sense of Whiteness. Unlike some Whites (Giroux, 1997), few respondents to this study felt stifled by White guilt or assumed a victim perspective as they constructed their public understanding of Whiteness. On the contrary, the interpersonal sense of Whiteness constructed by some respondents incorporated a sense of agency around issues of race and racism. That is, rather than defer to people of color as "experts" in race and racism, respondents revealed their capacity to recognize, name, and actively resist both institutional and personal racism.

Most respondents to this study were able to discuss their Whiteness without focusing on guilt. Rather than leading to guilt, an increasing understanding of racial privilege led to what one woman called a "positive awareness." Another

respondent, for example, discussed how her increasing awareness of power and privilege encouraged her to grow:

> I was always like, 'Yeah, of course people of color should have equal rights,' but I never got the extent to which differences still exist in this county, because we like to pretend like the Civil Rights Movement happened thirty years ago and everything's peachy now. But [now I] understand how my Whiteness sort of fits in all of that...which is often a hard thing for White students to get over.

This discussion of increased understanding of power and privilege hints at some of the emotional pain experienced as White students grapple with issues of race—emotional pain that may be at the core of many of the defense mechanisms described by Watt (2007).

Although discussed by only five respondents, a sense of agency appears to be the link between racial justice attitudes and actions. The students who displayed racial justice attitudes were the students who were most active for racial justice issues on campus. Several respondents discussed the need to overcome "colorblind" worldviews to achieve a sense of agency related to race. Previous understanding of being a "good White" for Elizabeth, for example, meant that recognizing racial differences aloud was a racist act: "I always thought that, that's racist when you're pointing at someone's race and you're calling attention to that. Don't do that." She continued,

> [Using] a racial modifier in a situation where it is not necessary, that's a sign of, you know, a prejudice...in the same grain, if you don't use a racial modifier when it makes sense to do so, that's also a prejudice.

Struggling to understand when it is appropriate to recognize race may indicate a developing sense of racial agency for Elizabeth; her struggle may also indicate a new reluctance to adhere to the "colorblind ideal" of a "good White" (Omi & Winant, 1994; Tatum, 2003).

Finally, Sarah explained how she came to realize she has the capacity to confront racism and "how it's okay to be someone who is White who talks about race," explaining,

> When I was really involved with Black Caucus, I was usually the only White person involved, so there were a lot of jokes about me being the token White person. I had to get to a point where I could understand my position in that group and see that, yes, I was a White person, but I was

also a person that was educated about people of color issues and could still contribute on a level. I could not have survived on a committee that was making important, big decisions about race as the only White person if I didn't just go in with the attitude that people weren't going to always assume that what I said was the "White girl" thing to say.

This narrative indicates not only that Sarah developed a sense of agency around issues of race, but also revealed her recognition of the importance of a cautious use of that agency. The "level" at which she feels comfortable contributing may be related to her appreciation of the different experiences for people of color on campus. Earlier in the interview, Sarah stated, "I won't pretend to understand what it is like to be a student of color on this campus, so I'm sure there's a level of hurt (regarding a recent racist event) that goes beyond anything I can understand." Sarah's sense of agency, therefore, was tempered by recognition that it must come from her perspective, the perspective of a White woman.

The 15 respondents to this study revealed that understanding Whiteness is a continuous process of rearticulating meaning based on new experiences. They discussed how their understanding moved from White as "the color of my skin" to an active re-articulation of a racialized sense of self. The process of rearticulating Whiteness resulted in recognizing the role of race in respondents' daily interactions. They were able to incorporate an understanding of guilt, power, and privilege in such as manner as to avoid the paralysis and victim perspective assumed by some Whites. Some students translated their personal understanding of Whiteness into public action that included a sense of agency to name and resist racism, and ultimately, engage in difficult dialogues.

Implications for Difficult Dialogues

The understanding of Whiteness demonstrated by respondents in this study has several implications for educators who hope to engage other White students in difficult dialogues related to power and privilege. Findings from this study support the conclusion that a critical consciousness of Whiteness was both constituent of, and required for, difficult dialogues. That is, difficult racial dialogues informed respondents' sense of Whiteness and this sense of Whiteness allowed students to engage more fully in those same dialogues. Findings from this study lead to the conclusion that students who engaged in the process of rearticulating their Whiteness developed skills to avoid many of the defense mechanism of difficult dialogues (Watt, 2007). In this section I offer suggestions that, based on the research findings, should both encourage a rearticulation of Whiteness and avoid the defense mechanisms articulated in the Privileged Identity Exploration Model.

Build a racially-salient critical consciousness. Watt (2007) concluded that a critical consciousness develops when one's own privileged status is explored on a personal and political level. Respondents to this study who had reflected upon, and come to some (albeit tentative) critical understanding of, their Whiteness engaged in difficult and emotional cross-racial dialogues. Recall Anthony's exchange with the faculty advisor. Like Anthony, Whites who have a critical sense of Whiteness may be better able to avoid the minimizing, denying, and rationalizing that could result from such a difficult racial situation. With an understanding that Whiteness is dynamic and continuously under construction, Whites, like Anthony, can listen, engage, and reflect upon the deeper causes of such racialized situations; most importantly, they can learn and grow. Further, as predicted by Watt (2007), respondents who demonstrated a critical consciousness avoided the defense mechanisms associated with a lack of critical consciousness: principium, false envy, or benevolence.

Build upon intellectual understandings that incorporate emotions. Classroom-based learning about power and privilege was common for all respondents in this study (Reason et al., 2005). However, relying solely on intellectual understanding is likely to result in defense mechanism such as rationalizing and intellectualizing (Watt, 2007), which arise from an effort to deny the painful emotions of difficult racial dialogues. While intellectual understanding serves as a base, the respondents in this study who were best equipped for engaging in difficult dialogues incorporated these emotions with their intellectual understanding.

Build upon the contribution of multiple subjectivities. Respondents incorporated multiple subjectivities (e.g., gender, sexual orientation, political orientation, socioeconomic status) into their understandings of their own Whiteness, which allowed them to build a level of empathy. Incorporating different perspectives, especially perspectives from one's own non-dominant subjectivities, precludes the use of denial or rationalization as defense mechanisms. Whites can hardly deny the negative influence of power and privilege related to race (i.e., racism) when they have incorporated an understanding of sexism or classism into their racial identity. Watt (2007) suggests sharing personal stories or factual information as strategies to minimize the use of denial or rationalization; results from this study suggest that encouraging White students to identify and explore their non-dominant subjectivities might also combat these defense mechanisms.

Conclusion

The critically conscious manner in which these students constructed their sense of Whiteness has multiple implications for educators who hope to engage White students in difficult dialogues across social identity groups, particularly across races. Importantly, the narratives of these students indicate that those of us who work with White students around racial identity must forego the previously understood developmental theories, in which White identity development is understood as a clean, linear process, in favor of a process that recognizes the importance of the continuous reexamination of Whiteness that incorporates multiple subjectivities toward a sense of agency around racial issues. By so doing, we will provide White students both the impetus and the opportunity to engage in the difficult dialogues which seem so important to this rearticulation process.

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