

Reflections on the White Privilege Conference

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Abstract: What is the work of White adult educators to dismantle racism in our classrooms and training sessions? How are we to engage and influence White people to do what is required to create a more just society? These are some questions that the ninth annual White Privilege Conference attempts to address. This *Perspective on Practice* essay reviews that conference to share my reflections on its meaning and relevance to adult education and implications for practitioners.

I am excited, I feel knowledgeable; I am finally in a space talking about being White with White people who get it. I contribute eagerly, "Me too. When I talk with Whites, sometimes I go to this dark place..." Groans from the room erupt and I know that I have fallen into the trap of using a word that associates dark with bad. I want to curl up and disappear. The presenter says to me that I could say that, or I could say ... but I'm so nervous I don't hear her. I push my way through my sentence and then fall silent. A dialogue begins in my head. I want to assure the group of my enlightenment; I want to explain...

The White Privilege Conference (WPC) was founded by Eddie Moore, Jr. in 1999 and "serves as a yearly opportunity to examine and explore issues of White privilege, diversity, multicultural education, multicultural leadership, social justice, race/racism, sexual orientation, gender relations, and other systems of privilege/oppression" (Speak Out, n.d.). Its purpose is to provide space conducive to dialogue and honesty, as participants think and talk about "the advantages that accrue to some but not others," and "offers a means to develop and sustain ongoing work to dismantle this system of White privilege, White supremacy, and oppression" (University of Colorado at Colorado Springs, 2008, para. 1). The conference attracts participants from business and industry, education, community service, artists, musicians, and activists. Organizers are careful to clarify that it is not a place for "beating up on White folks" (Speak Out, n.d., para. 2) rather, it is a place for critical and deep reflection.

The theme for this conference was "Critical Liberation Praxis: Creating Transformation for Social Justice". It was a fast paced conference that began at 8 am and continued until 10 pm. In addition to presenters, there were newly released films and documentaries, discussion and caucus groups, and keynotes. There were no conference papers; speakers or presenters distributed handouts relevant to their session.

Reflections

Two rather disorienting experiences caused me to think deeply about myself—who I believed myself to be and how I felt about describing my inner reflections to strangers. I think of myself as an informed White Adult Educator, one who assumes racialized experiences will take

place in all classes or trainings, and preparation to assist in the negotiation of those experiences is essential. I also think of myself as someone who is critically reflective in the moment. My experiences at the WPC challenged both of those beliefs.

Sometimes I “Step In It” and Sometimes I Don’t

I started the conference by attending a daylong session conducted by Frances Kendall on *Understanding White Privilege*. As the discussion unfolded, Dr. Kendall introduced the concept that White people say *stupid things* or *step in it*, which really means we make racially divisive statements. We say something but do not mean to offend. We use words that have subtexts or sub-meanings to them, microaggressions, which “are subtle insults (verbal, nonverbal, and/or visual) directed toward People of Color, often automatically or unconsciously” (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000, p. 60). The dominant social group (White people) accepts the use of these insults with little regard or belief that they are harmful...the denial of the intergenerational and historical effect of pain. Microaggressions have a cumulative affect. As Persons of Color go through their day, these microaggressions shower them. Taken individually, each may be tolerable and absorbed without damage to the psyche. Taken collectively, they fill the psyche much as water fills a glass until the water (microaggressions) spills over. In the context of interactions between White people and People of Color, each are evaluating the statement within the context of their own experience. From the White person’s perspective, the Person of Color’s reaction, which is most likely an angry one, seems out of proportion to the single statement. The Person of Color, on the other hand, has had too many for that day. This latest microaggression is the final drop of water that causes the glass to overflow. The White person is puzzled and confused and blames the Person of Color for what appears to her/him to be an overreaction.

During the course of the day, I *stepped into it* at least twice. The opening paragraph is an example of one of them. I’m sure there were others. I am careful; I understood microaggressions long before I knew the word. I am informed; I think before I speak. Yet when I *stepped in it*, my comments elicited a myriad of feelings. I felt embarrassed and wanted to explain there was no relation to race. I wanted to defend myself and assure the group it was unintentional. Later, I felt annoyed...here I am a sensitive White person who is so careful about words and actions. Why is that not good enough? Don’t I ever get to be Tricia first and a White person second?

Lights, Camera, (Script,) Action

The next morning the key-note speaker talked about his life as an adopted Korean American. He spoke of the script given him growing up in a White family but not being White—the norming of a White culture that was not his. Later that day we were asked to turn to someone next to us and share our script. I was still rebounding from my *stepping in it* experience of the day before—processing and thinking about it. I told this person I was uncomfortable speaking of this script; it is difficult and embarrassing. When it was her turn to talk she immediately said, “My script was that I was raised to think I was better than some...” and then she continued. My initial feeling was that I had blown it, that I should be able to spiel off my script as easily as she did—I must not be as evolved if I cannot do that. However, as she said them, her lines felt rehearsed. They were all true because she was a White Jewish American, and she was expressing the racist

ideology absorbed by all White people. What she said was true, but it did not feel true. It felt like I had stepped into the *Stepford Wives*¹ universe.

There was an inconsistency between her words and the manner in which she stated them. I did not see any emotion - no regret, no sadness, no fear, or shame. When I say my script, I have all these mixed-up feelings. My expression of those feelings is non-verbal; my script is hesitant; I stumble around as I try to find words. I experience guilt and shame when I say them. I expected to see or feel those non-verbal expressions as she talked. I expected to get some sense of conflict as she expressed the racist ideology we shared. Yet her statements felt robotic to me. They felt prepared and the emotion behind them was vacant. Was that because she felt nothing or was it because she was guarding her emotions? Again, I questioned my own understandings. Should I be able to say that I was raised to believe I was better than people who were not White and feel nothing about that? Was I stuck in a past of guilt and shame, unable to move beyond that in my White identity development?

The legacy of White supremacy is inescapable; my parents taught me as their parents taught them. Yet, that legacy was not my only script. A woman of American Indian heritage came into my life when I was 7 and became a sort of surrogate mother. She was the first to speak to me of Whiteness and privilege. Because of her racial teachings, I could identify that the treatment of my Alaskan Native third grade classmate was different because she was not White and I understood that treatment to be wrong. I had no power to change it. All I could do was stand by my classmate's side. While my "script" was about White supremacy, it was also about right and wrong, standing beside others treated unjustly and recognizing racialized experiences. When asked to tell my scripted story, both the script of White supremacy and the script taught by my surrogate mother are worthy of inclusion. I resist the request to minimize it into a sound bite.

Relevance to Adult Educators

The experiences of *stepping in it* and telling my scripted story caused me to wonder about the collective messages of the conference and their application to adult education. I started to become suspicious; I wondered if we (White people) were supposed to leave the conference spouting the newest or latest enlightened rhetoric of liberal anti-racist ideology. If so, that would not align with the goals and mission of the conference, which was to promote critical reflection and honest dialogue; yet, there were times when I felt as if I was part of a propaganda machine. Part of the experience I had when asked to tell my story was the lack of emotion I experienced from my script-sharing partner. I questioned if the agenda of the conference was to send White people out to recite consistent messages about White supremacy and racism. Then I wondered if my conclusion was based on some kind of defensiveness, resistance, or denial on my part as a White participant or if there was actually some collective message the conference organizers hoped that White people would go forth and deliver. I wondered: Suppose there were some collective messages, was that bad? I started to take note of the following themes, which I heard consistently in the keynote addresses, the individual sessions, and even the films and caucus groups:

1. Most White people do not intend to be racially divisive, on an individual basis.
2. This is about White people doing our own work before doing it with other White people.

¹ *Stepford Wives* by Ira Levin, 1972, film adaptation by William Goldmen in 1975.

3. White people *step in it* or say/do stupid things, again unintentionally...this is inescapable and a product of a racist and white supremacist society.
4. When White people do this work, they will often feel blamed and shamed and/or become defensive; professionals need to find ways to assist White people to get past that so they can begin the work of healing and change.

These identify some pertinent issues in the work of anti-racist adult education and training. The conference workshops and keynotes seemed designed to address possible solutions to those.

Intention

I was most intrigued with the notion of intention. Are White people well-intentioned? As an educator, my understanding of White students and their intentions could help me navigate racialized moments in a classroom or training session. I certainly feel that I am well-intentioned as my earlier reflection attested, and yet I created a divisive space with my comments. Intention and racial identity development have a connection. White racial identity development is movement in and out and through self understanding about systemic racism and individual behavior. That understanding allows me to be patient with White people who appear oblivious to the embedded nature of racism and privilege. Yet, this conference and the multiple messages there were about well-intentioned White people had me re-thinking that position. Perhaps my patience was misguided or should be redirected.

Frances Kendall, in her session, distributed a handout that read, “While the bestowal of White privilege is not necessarily intentional and/or malicious, obviously it is usually one or both.” This statement reveals the very dilemma and complexity of the supremacy and privilege of Whiteness; it is intentional and malicious regardless of my meaning. My intent may be good, yet my impact may perpetuate racism and privilege. As I did, White people will inevitably make racially divisive statements, microaggressions. Some White people shrug their shoulders, mentally say, “Oh well” and move on, never admitting the experience of the Person(s) of Color; these White people are not paying attention to their impact, only their intention. It is this obliviousness I find most challenging when teaching or training. Additionally, I have seen White people who acknowledge their microaggression, express a desire to learn from it, and re-state their message differently; they pay attention to both their intent and hold themselves responsible for their impact. It is this behavior that I find most rewarding when teaching or training. The messages of the sessions seemed more focused on the intent of White people rather than on what White people should do after they have committed the microaggression. The challenge for White people is to admit and take responsibility for the microaggression(s) without becoming defensive. I think the conference fell short on how to move past intention to actions that acknowledge responsibility; those actions that will change the discourse and relationships between White people and People of Color.

Denial, Blame, Guilt, and Shame

There were multiple workshops on how to avoid, rather than work through White people’s defensiveness. In most personal areas human beings grow through when we accept and acknowledge current circumstance or reality. Once that acceptance is fully embraced, then lasting growth or change is more likely. Critical Race Theorists (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001) might argue

that oppressors become defensive because that best protects their privilege; it is in their own best interest to react in that manner. The avoidance of defensiveness seems to short-cut the process of growth for White people. In the sessions I attended, there was no real exploration about why White people are defensive. I wonder why we (White people) become defensive. I *think* I know why *I* do; I feel the weight and responsibility of my ancestors' actions. It is as if I were the store owner that posted the *Whites Only* sign. I have trouble separating myself from those ancestral actions and my own actions. Yet, I agree with the suggestion that my inability to separate myself is a deliberate strategy that keeps me focused on issues I can do nothing about (i.e., the history of segregation), rather than attention on my own behaviors (microaggressions), which are in my complete control. I am circling back to intention because if I tell myself I am well intentioned, then I excuse my individual actions and if I tell myself I am not the store owner, nor would I ever be that, then I can avoid looking at the larger, systemic issues, too.

In Gary Howard's session, *Growing Good White Folks*, he considered these questions: Why does it take so long for White people to understand systems of racism and privilege? What's in the way? And what will it take to dismantle these systems? Howard's answers were embedded in the steps of deep and critical dialogue, in understanding White racial identity development or orientations and cultural competence. The deep and critical dialogue takes place only when the teacher or presenter creates an open, trusting space. Once such an atmosphere is established, White people are introduced to his three White Identity Orientations. In this framework participants examine thoughts, feelings, and actions associated with each orientation: fundamentalist, integrationist, and transformationist. In the course of exploring this model, White people identify which orientation fits their behavior and what it will take for them to move into the transformationist orientation. Intuitively, what we learned in the session made sense, but I hungered for two things that he promised but that I did not think were adequately addressed: what is in the way and why does it take so long? I wanted a deeper exploration of the defensiveness of White people: why is it so difficult for us to believe that racism still exists, and that I, as an individual and member of society, am part of that?

WII FM

Additionally, many workshops and facilitators focused on strategies to *convince* White people that the work of equity and social change and justice is worthwhile. In corporate training circles, a strategy I learned was referred to as the WII FM radio station – *What's In It For Me*. To influence change, I was told, it was important to convince the participants first of how it (whatever the training was about) would benefit them. Many sessions dealt with how a racist system has damaged White people too. The rationale was that our lives (White people's) have been less rich and, as a nation, have not reached our full potential.

This is a conflicted issue for me. I had recently attended a lecture by Tim Wise in which he spoke the same rhetoric. I waited in line afterwards and questioned him about this strategy. I shared my concern that when we try to point out to White people how ending racism is in their own best interest, we were perpetuating privilege; it was still all about White people. I said I thought the better strategy was for White people to join the anti-racist movement because ultimately it was the right thing to do. He said that when he first started this work, he thought the same way, but over the years he had come to realize that it was not working, so he changed tactics.

He indicated that what he was saying was true, that with the denial of equal opportunity, White people had, indeed, lost something. Additionally in using this strategy he felt that he was more successful with White people.

While working in prison, I had a similar dilemma with offenders. Part of my job was to prepare them for life back “on the streets.” They were resistive to my inexperience as a non-offender and to a message that a “responsible” life was worthwhile. In the beginning, I was easily distracted and tried to defend my legitimacy. That did not work. Then I tried to “sell” them the peaceful life they would have without sirens and raids at their homes. That did not work. Finally, I stopped trying to convince them and explored the criminal and responsible lifestyle through posing dilemmas and not offering a right or wrong answer. Success is difficult to measure in prison, but the level of discourse changed when I changed tactics; it seemed more honest and students more engaged. The focus was off me and on them. Like my prisoners, as I sat in session after session, WII FM did not move me. I was like the offenders in my class, skeptical of the speakers and leery of the promises of “riches” that lay beyond the horizon.

White Space

On the third day I had an Aha! moment. It occurred to me that this conference space did not feel White to me. That thought surprised me. What did White feel like? Why was this space not White? Proportionately, there were more People of Color at this conference than I think I have experienced at other conferences. I think that ratio played a role in how I “experienced” the space; it was more diverse and less influenced by the cultural norms of White, European Americans; for example, punctuality did not feel as important. Additionally, though, I think the White people who attended were different too. Peggy McIntosh named it when she said the participants at the White Privilege Conference were “beloved” to her because it was one of the few times she was with White people who knew they were White.

One of my goals in attending the conference was to find a space in which I could question my Whiteness and not be guarded about it; I could let my figurative hair down and try to really reach inside me to know more about how my “racism runs through me” (Brookfield, personal communication, September, 2007). Although I attended only one of the White caucus groups, I realized, in an informal way, I did get to experience this as a White space for learning. I think also, it did not have the constraints that other research conferences did regarding time, elitist language, and paper presentation style all of which I associate with a Eurocentric paradigm. The dress code was casual, the presentation style was casual, and the delivery of food was casual (less structured, more relaxed) though the content was as rigorous as any other conference. This absence of formality helped take the focus off the trimmings and place it on the people and content.

Concluding Thoughts

This is a good conference for White Adult Educators. It is an inclusive space because many venues of adult education were represented; it is a reflective space because time was built into the conference to think and talk about being privileged; and it was a learning space because current scholars were keynotes and presenters and were accessible before and after their sessions. Racism has become subtle and “shift-shaping” (Wise, 2008), and as adult educators, we need to be

sensitive to how we can *step in it* and/or miss microaggressions. This conference can provide a space for our honest and deep reflection on ourselves and our practice.

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