# Transforming Individual to Structural Thinking About Race

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The perspectives we use to make sense of the world around us inevitably frame our actions. When it comes to understanding actions around race and identity, the ideology of white supremacy has, understandably, been a major focus of attention. White supremacy as an ideology is built on the notion that Whites should automatically and naturally be in positions of power and authority. This is because Whites are presumed to exhibit supposedly higher intelligence and to possess the ability to use logic, reason, and analysis to make calm and objective decisions. Under white supremacy, people of color, on the other hand, are viewed as too emotional, unpredictable, and prone to losing control very easily. White supremacy uses their presumed irrationality and propensity to act violently as a justification for conflating leadership with whiteness.

This ideology is learned from an early age. When viewed through the lens of white supremacy and what Feagin (2013) calls the white racial frame, the same behaviors are assigned very different meanings based on

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the racial identity of the person concerned. For example, an admission of error or owning up to a mistake is seen as a refreshingly honest display of openness and vulnerability by a White person, but as evidence of incompetence and affirmative action gone wrong in a person of color. Standing up and speaking strongly in support of your ideas is much more likely to be taken as evidence of admirable commitment in Whites, but seen as pushing an agenda or being "uppity" in people of color. Displaying emotion and shedding tears is viewed as an indicator of deep authenticity in Whites, but a sign of psychological instability in people of color.

Replacing an individualist perspective with one that now interprets racism as a structural phenomenon involves understanding that white supremacy is embedded in, and learned from, institutional policies, practices, and protocols. This constitutes a transformative cognitive shift that has great ramifications for how we dismantle racism. No longer do we focus only on intrapersonal anti-racism. Instead, we devote significant time and energy to changing institutional structures and collective habits. Our attention shifts to the importance of collective efforts as we come to realize that individual and collective liberation are inseparable (Crass, 2013). Learning to think structurally is an example of a fundamental shift in our meaning perspective of how we understand racism and white supremacy functions and how best to combat these.

## The Ideology of Individualism

Individualism as a dominant ideology in the United States comprises a set of beliefs and practices that help keep a blatantly unequal system in place. It comprises two core beliefs. The first is that we live on a roughly level playing field and that anyone can make what they want of their life by dint of their own perseverance and hard work. When parents tell their children that they can be anything they want to be, this seems an optimistic and motivational message. It inspires children to visualize alternative futures. It inspires dreams and underscores the Horatio Alger mythology that anyone can lift themselves up by their boot straps, pull their socks up, and soar out into the world as a dynamic entrepreneur.

The second core belief is that we are in control of our individual destinies, captains of our souls. What we make of our lives is believed to be a result of the personal decisions we take at the significant turning points we all experience. The feelings, instincts, and intuitions that govern our actions are believed to be unique to us alone. Together they constitute

our particular identity, the sole actor who maneuvers through the terrain of an individual life. At some deep level, we see ourselves as disconnected from the settings, locations, and people that surround us as we choose our particular path.

This individualist emphasis is an enduring, deeply rooted, and extremely powerful element of the American psyche, particularly for Whites. It's bound up with notions of individual liberty, the flag, freedom of speech, and Lady Liberty waving in generations of hopeful immigrants and giving them the chance to make better lives for themselves. Archetypal figures such as the cowboy, the frontier settler, even the venture capitalist embody the notion that anyone can be President or the CEO of a global corporation.

Of course, this is a white lie in that life chances are irrevocably tied to racial identity. So if you are White, then the chances that you will be able to aspire to and create wealth are higher. The myth of individualism uses Black exceptionalism—the successes of individuals of color from President Obama to Michael Jordan or Kanye West—to prove its truth. "Look at all these successful Black politicians, media moguls and billionaire sports stars—they prove that anyone can be wildly successful irrespective of their race!"

## Individualism and Racism

An individualistic understanding of racism interprets it as a personal choice. White people are judged to be able to decide on a day by day basis whether or not they will behave in a racist way. When racism is perceived as a series of individual judgments and actions—today I was racist but yesterday I was not—then combatting racism becomes seen as a matter of personal fortitude. Whites can make a resolution to be on high alert for their own enactment of racial microaggressions, can vow to monitor their implicit biases, and strive to cut out racist jokes, tropes, and stereotypes. Viewed this way, Whites like myself can convince ourselves that real progress is being made, one person at a time.

I don't want to dismiss these individual kinds of efforts as naïve. I take them very seriously and try to work on myself in all the ways just described. But I'm also aware that seeing anti-racism as a matter of personal resolve obscures the systemic nature of the phenomenon. Individual acts of racism are the personal enactments of structural reality.

White supremacy as an ideology and system ensures the continuing dominance of one racial group by portraying its exercise of control as an uncontestable empirical truth. If you are imbued with this ideology, then the fact that Whites end up in positions of power and authority is not the result of systemic oppression, but just the way things are. The continuing disenfranchisement and marginalization of people of color are not seen as being linked to school district funding mechanisms, the specific design of intelligence tests, or redlining housing policies. The disproportionate levels of infant mortality or poor health care among communities of color are rarely tied to the fact that members of those communities have to piece together a minimum wage from two or three part-time jobs, none of which carry health benefits. The school to prison pipeline is not connected to the criminalization of blackness and brownness.

An anti-racist identity must focus on understanding racism as structural and systemic, and on a commitment to taking collective action to change those structures and systems. Working on your own racist habits, inclinations, and biases is important and necessary, but it is only the beginning of a fully realized anti-racist identity. We must move from the personal to the collective, from the individual to the systemic. We must contribute to building movements, commit to furthering institutional and community initiatives that address inequity, and focus our energies on changing policies and structures. People come and go but structures and policies endure unless some collective effort disrupts them. In short, we need to think structurally, not individually.

In their analysis of the structural roots of implicit bias, Daumeyer et al. (2017) argue that, "a model of implicit bias that situates its expression on situational factors, then, should be more acceptable to individuals" (p. 258). I have observed this to be the case when working with Whites to unearth learned racism. It seems that when biases, microaggressions and racist stereotypes are understood as socially and culturally learned rather than as originating in individual psyches, there is less embarrassment to owning up to them. If teachers and leaders disclose how they learned to think structurally and explain that a white supremacist view of the world comes from passing through structures and systems, then this can legitimize others going public with their own learned racism. When teachers and leaders present how learning racism was as a normal part of their enculturation and socialization, then it often makes it easier for people to talk about how it's manifested in their own lives. I often say that to grow up in a racist world and not to have learned racist conditioning

would be very strange. So I try to normalize racism by presenting it not as a shameful personal moral defect but as a natural outcome of living every day in racist systems and structures.

## Beginning with Story: The Brain Fart

I advocate starting most work on developing a White anti-racist identity with some kind of personal narrative or story that is analyzed using a structural frame. When teaching structural thinking, people are encouraged to work backward from a particular event and to see how specific actions are structurally framed.

The following is an example of a story I use to lead participants into structural thinking.

I was running what I thought was an effective student discussion one day in a university graduate class that was overwhelmingly White and mostly female. I considered the discussion successful because it seemed that everybody was participating in roughly equal measure.

About thirty minutes into the class, I raised a particular issue and asked everyone to contribute their thinking on the topic. A couple of students hesitantly ventured their initial thoughts and I practiced my usual waiting time until eventually everyone had spoken. The contributions were focused and thoughtful and I was pleased by the way the students had brought a variety of perspectives to the issue.

I began summarizing the main themes that I thought had emerged from the comments and I started to differentiate the contradictory views that I felt had been expressed.

Suddenly a White woman participant, Jenn, raised her hand.

"Excuse me, we haven't heard from Mia," she said.

Mia was a young Asian American woman and the thought that I had overlooked her was immediately embarrassing to me.

"I'm really sorry about that Mia," I said. "I don't know how that happened. My apologies, I don't know how I missed you. Can we hear from you what you're thinking about?"

Mia made her contribution and shortly afterward we took a mid-class break.

I was still bothered and feeling embarrassed by my not noticing that Mia hadn't spoken and as I brewed up some tea in my office close to the classroom I started to go over what had just happened.

It became obvious to me almost immediately that this was a classic example of a microaggression. Microaggressions occur when members of the dominant culture act unwittingly in ways that diminish, demean, and marginalize members of minority groups. These actions are so subtle that the receivers are often left wondering "Did that really happen?" or "Am I making too much of something? Am I imagining this?"

When challenged on their actions, those committing microaggressions usually respond by saying the person identifying the aggression is being too sensitive, making a mountain out of a molehill, or just misunderstanding what was said or meant. Members of the dominant culture then usually jump in to excuse and explain away the aggression, saying that it was a slip of the tongue, came out the wrong way, and that no harm was meant. This is often accompanied by character witness testimonials of how the aggressor doesn't have a racist bone in their body, is a good person, and cares for all students.

The class resumed after break and I began by speaking about what had happened when I had overlooked Mia.

"I want to thank Jenn for bringing to my attention the fact that I completely overlooked Mia in class. What you've just witnessed is a classic example of a racial microaggression. I had no intent to exclude Mia from the discussion and no awareness of that happening. Yet when I thanked you all for contributing and began to summarize your comments I completely overlooked a woman of color. Microaggressions are the small acts of exclusion that Whites often enact against people of color. They're not deliberate or intentional and they happen with no wish to harm someone else. But that's what happened when I didn't notice that Mia hadn't spoken and I went into my summary."

Almost immediately, the only White male member of the group, John, spoke up.

"You know Dr. Brookfield I think you're being way too hard on yourself. You just had a forgetful moment. Not every action has to do with race. Sometimes you're just tired. You just had a brain fart. I don't think you should blame yourself. If we take this to the extreme we're never going to be able to do or say anything without being thought of as racist."

I thought it was beautifully ironic that John's response captured a dynamic of microaggressions that I hadn't previously talked about. His comments illustrated precisely how members of the dominant culture jump in to save others who they feel are being unjustly accused. I, not

Mia, had been the one to name my own microaggression, and yet John had felt compelled to jump in and save me from myself.

I told John that he had just exemplified a very predictable dynamic that happens of Whites trying to excuse other Whites who are called on their microaggressions.

John seemed offended by my comments. "Well, it's obvious I can't say anything in this course without being called a racist!" he exclaimed. "This is clearly not a safe space for me so I'm just going to shut up."

Just then Mia spoke up.

"This is not the first time this has happened to me," she said, her voice quavering. "In every class I've been in at this institution I feel I've been systematically ignored. It's like people don't see me or think I'm in the room."

## Coding the Story

Here's how I get students to connect a story such as The Brain Fart to thinking structurally about race.

I hand out a written version of the story and ask people to spend five minutes carefully reading it. They are told to answer the three questions below:

- What events or actions in the story demonstrate the presence of white supremacy as an ideology or set of practices?
- How is the specific location of the story affected by wider structures, systems, and forces?
- Whose interests inside and outside the specific location of the story are served or harmed by the events described?

After completing their responses to the questions, people share their responses in small groups. The whole workshop, class, or meeting then reconvenes and we hear what people have talked about.

Here's how the discussion of The Brain Fart might go.

- What events or actions in the story demonstrate the presence of white supremacy as both an ideology or set of practices?

Since the story is about a racial microaggression, it's pretty predictable that people will point out how my forgetting to include Mia is an example of white supremacy in action. They'll also recognize that Jenn's interruption represented a challenge both to white supremacy and to patriarchy. My initial apology when reacting to Jenn's pointing out my ignoring Mia is often interpreted as a typically white blindness to the effect of one's actions. At this point, people may cite the notion of white fragility (DiAngelo, 2018).

John's intervention to excuse and save me is also cited as an example of white supremacy at play. By excusing my ignoring Mia, John is trying to advance the idea that race had little significance in the situation, and that this was a one-off event and not any form of systemic exclusion. John's announcing that he now doesn't feel safe in the course and that he's going to withdraw from subsequent conversations is also an exemplar of whiteness. Whites, unlike people of color, are able to choose when they wish to engage with race.

- How is the specific location of the story affected by wider structures, systems, and forces?

The story takes place in a specific classroom and it is easy to assume that this constitutes more or less a self-contained universe. But I hope that participants will dig deeper.

The first point of analysis is usually the college. People ask about the college's mission statement, its funding, and the health of student enrolments. They ask about the degree to which the class itself exemplifies or contradicts the mission statement. I usually mention the influence of market forces. I teach in a private institution, so the logic of capitalism is clearly at play. My institution is tuition driven, and it's clear that an overwhelming concern of leadership is to attract the maximum number of students.

I ask people to ponder what influence, if any, the concern to attract tuition revenue might have on the conduct of the class. Have I created a problem by making John decide he doesn't wish to participate any more in the course? Could this lead to him dropping out and the subsequent loss of tuition revenue? What will be the financial consequences of my teaching about microaggressions? If communities of color become aware this is happening, would it cause more students of color to apply to the

university? Or, would this work be opposed by alumni as too radical and not in keeping with the university's traditions and identity?

It's likely that I'll then ask participants to consider how traditions are shaped and institutional identities defined. This brings into play the levers and influences behind the scenes such as the Board of Trustees. Students tend to think that power in colleges resides in the senior leadership team comprised of the President, Provost, and Dean's Council. In fact, the body ultimately responsible for setting policy, defining goals, and assessing compliance with the mission is the Board of Trustees.

Knowing this, I get people to go to the college's web site and look up the composition of the board. What kind of occupations or interests are represented in the board's membership? Typically, board members are recruited because they can ensure the financial stability of the college by attracting possible donors. Hence, many of them hold prominent positions as CEOs or CFOs in major corporations, banks, and investment firms. I suggest that participants employ online search engines to find out about the racial mix of the board and ask what it means for the direction of the university to be set and monitored by a group composed of mostly White, business representatives.

- Whose interests inside and outside the specific location of the story are served or harmed by the events described?

Here participants have to shift their frame of analysis to considering asymmetries of power. People often say that it's obvious that Mia's interests are served because she got the opportunity to contribute, and that John's interests are harmed because he felt Stephen had silenced him.

When this analysis is expressed, I ask participants to go back and read the story again. I explain that I want them to think about the framing of this story within a system of white supremacy and emphasize that, like all dominant ideologies, white supremacy is designed to be self-sustaining. In other words, it's set up to keep white power and white normativity in place and viewed as the natural state of things. White supremacy protects itself by appearing to be unremarkable, a form of common sense. For me this suggests a reading of the story that's directly opposite to the one just described.

Sometimes, the reminder of the construct of white supremacy means that people now talk about Mia and John in different ways. Mia is seen

as someone who has a history of being silenced by being ignored. People quote the fact that she tells the class that being overlooked is her typical experience at the university.

John's situation is now seen as more complicated. Although people still argue he has been harmed by my intervention and acknowledge his feeling that he is now in an unsafe environment, his decision to remove himself from the discussion is now sometimes positioned as an act of white privilege. John is privileged because he can simply turn away from the reality of race and choose not to think about what it means in a racist world. He has been granted the option of denying reality without much harm accruing to him. This, of course, is the direct opposite to the experience of people of color who are robbed of the choice of ignoring the daily realities of racism and white supremacy.

## Doing a Power Analysis

The next stage is to ask people to conduct a power analysis of the story. I want them to be aware of how power dynamics are embedded in specific events. Although the story focuses on one class in one institution at one particular moment, the interactions described are shaped by wider asymmetries of power.

To help students do this, I give a brief typology of three different kinds of power. I discuss what these terms mean and give examples of them in action.

- Repressive power—power used to constrain options, limit freedom, or maintain the status quo. This could be as simple as a supervisor telling someone not to make trouble by bringing up a contentious issue, or as explosive as paramilitary forces beating up or killing protesters on the street.
- Emancipatory power—power experienced as motivating or galvanizing and that fuels activism and the desire for change. This could be a supervisor asking an employee "How can I help you do your best work?" to Black Lives Matter members mobilizing quickly for a day of protest immediately after a police killing.
- Disciplinary power—power that people exert on themselves to make sure they don't transgress too far against the powers that be. An

example might be arguing for more institutional diversity and inclu-
sion efforts but stopping short of lobbying for a direct focus on
uncovering white supremacy at the institution.

I then ask the participants to reread the story on their own and identify
(a) the kinds of power they see being exercised in the story and (b) the
wider systems, structures, and ideologies that support the exercise of each
kind of power. They then compile their responses in small groups and the
whole class reconvenes.

### Repressive Power

I am usually identified as the chief enactor of repressive power. This is
because people see my overlooking of Mia as an example of how systems
embody white normativity and patriarchy. As the instructor, I have the
weight of institutional authority behind his actions. That means it takes
an act of courage to stand up to me and point out my disregarding of a
woman of color. I am often identified as enacting patriarchy, the idea
that because men are assumed to think more logically, rationally, and
objectively they should be in charge of making decisions for the collective.

John is also sometimes cited as exercising repressive power because he
has removed himself from any further discussion of racial issues. On the
face of it, this seems like a withdrawing or giving up of power. However,
in removing himself from the conversation, he is denying other students
the chance to learn how he experiences and enacts white supremacy. After
all, the experts on how white supremacy and patriarchy are learned and
internalized are White people. By not contributing to future discussions,
John is blocking the other students' opportunity to understand better
how dominant ideologies operate to determine Whites' behavior.

### Emancipatory Power

Because she spoke up to address Stephen's overlooking of Mia, Jenn is
typically cited as the chief enactor of emancipatory power. Her interven-
tion caused me to ask Mia to express her opinion on the matter at hand.
It also prompted me to reflect on the incident during the break and to
come back and initiate a conversation on microaggressions.

Sometimes, people get into a deep conversation about the problematic notion of a White person "liberating" a person of color, and the colonial legacy that embodies. Was it condescending of Jenn to intervene, thereby robbing Mia of the chance to speak up for herself? Did it perpetuate the "savior" mentality, where Whites take on the responsibility to liberate people of color from oppression? Or, was Jenn using her white privilege in a responsible way to bring the exercise of white supremacy to the attention of a powerful White male? After all, she could make the challenge to my authority without the risk of being accused of playing the race card, whereas I could have dismissed Mia as seeing a racial motive where none existed.

## Disciplinary Power

Disciplinary power is power exercised by someone on themselves, to ensure they keep their conduct within acceptable tramlines and norms. In this instance, Mia is usually identified as the enactor of disciplinary power. She has learned to stay quiet when she is overlooked or ignored either because she has learned that's how the world works or because she has suffered the consequences of speaking up for herself. Maybe her peers have told her that challenging a White professor for sins of omission will bring down a punishment on her. Possibly, her elders have instilled in her a cultural reverence of authority and told her it is disrespectful to criticize a teacher. Maybe her complaints in the past have been dismissed or not believed. Perhaps she is just exhausted from having to confront all the microaggressions and institutional racism she has experienced.

As people talk about Mia's choice to remain silent, the very notion of choice becomes examined. When you know you will be dismissed or punished for an action, what kind of free choice really exists? Participants ponder whether staying silent was a conscious decision on Mia's part informed by her past experience of criticizing authority, or whether it was a deeply internalized response that she had little awareness of. Perhaps this represented the way she had been taught to move through her life.

The discussion can then branch into different directions. Sometimes, people focus on the way that Asian American culture and the Confucian tradition instill the notion of good conduct as listening respectfully to elders and automatically attributing wisdom to their actions and decisions. When that happens we talk about the way that cultural upbringing frames so many interactions in communities and organizations. If we focus

on Mia learning that to survive she needs to stay silent when she is over-looked, then we are back to acknowledging the influence of patriarchy and white supremacy. If the discussion goes in this latter direction then we talk about the racial and gender composition of influential bodies such as congress, the presidency, the military, multinational banking, the judi-ciary, and corporate America. Female participants tend to bring numerous examples of being systematically marginalized or ignored in the male dominated institutions or organizations where they have worked.

## Final Comment

Thinking structurally is a transformative cognitive move in developing an anti-racist White identity. Moving away from an individualist ideology means that we come to understand our own learned racism not as an inherent moral flaw but as a very predictable result of growing up subject to quietly effective white supremacist conditioning. Viewing our own racist acts and inclinations as structurally determined helps move people past an extended fixation on their guilt and shame. It is easy to spend all your time focused on your past sins and embarrassing naiveté and to be mortified by the casual racism you've enacted. This obsession with white guilt is a dead end. Thinking structurally lifts you out of that extended fixation on your flaws and moves you more quickly to activism.

A structural perspective inevitably emphasizes the humanly created nature of white supremacy. Anything that has been created by humans can be dismantled and replaced by them. Of course, doing this will be a long and difficult process that will require collective effort. Many anti-racist trainings focus on changing individual behavior and becoming less influenced by implicit biases and racial stereotypes. Although those things are important starting points, real, and substantive, change will only come when structures, systems, and policies are fundamentally altered or replaced. And that will only happen if people work in political parties and social movements. In his way, thinking structurally is the mental kick-starter to collective action.

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