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BEING WHITE AND BEING RIGHT

Critiquing Individual and Collective Privilege

INTRODUCTION

I begin this chapter by discussing how Whiteness is a privilege that, while invisible to Whites, is hyper-visible to non-Whites. This discussion reveals why Whites resist analyzing the concept and the consequences of such resistance. I then focus on how I have dealt with Whiteness in my classes and discuss one strategy that has been used to overcome the silencing of non-Whites in the classroom. As a White male professor, Whiteness comes easy to support (as is the case for my White students) and I argue that only through conscious efforts can the classroom be a vehicle for inclusive dialogue that will facilitate learning for all.

WHITE PRIVILEGE

As long as White people are not racially seen and named, they function as the human norm. Other people are "raced"[1] while Whites see themselves as just people. Whites are individuals free from the constraint of being labeled a representative of a racial group. This raises the point that there is no more powerful position than that of being "just human," with the claim to speak for the commonality of humanity. Raced people can't do that; they can only speak for their race but non-raced people can, for they do not represent the interests of an entire race. The definition of Whites as non-raced is most evident in the absence of reference to Whiteness in the everyday language of White people. Even as I write this document, I find the term unusual and feel odd even writing self-consciously about Whiteness. It is a bit like taking your car to a mechanic, and when "he" takes off his hat and you discover "he" is a female. As one of my students stated, "it's just not natural."

   Nevertheless, the assumption that White Canadians are just people, which is not much different than saying that Whites are people whereas other ethno-cultural groups are something else, is endemic to Canadian culture. Whites grow up[2] without having their racial supremacy being questioned. As Mills (1997) points out:

   White misunderstanding, misrepresentation, evasion, and self-deception on matters related to race are… psychically required for conquest, colonization, andenslavement… these phenomena are in no way accidental, but… [it]

> requires a certain schedule of structured blindness in order to establish and maintain the white polity. (p. 9)

Privilege is hard to see for those who were born with access to power and resources (Kendall, 2001).

At the same time, it is a very tangible and concrete for those to whom privilege is not granted. As such, it should be noted that White privilege is an institutional set of benefits granted to those who, by colour[3], resemble the people who dominate the powerful positions in our institutions and organizations. In turn, these become individual benefits (Manglitz, 2003). This system is not based on each individual White person's intention to harm but on a racial group's determination to preserve what they believe is rightly theirs. This distinction is, on the one hand, important, and, on the other hand, not important at all because, regardless of our personal intent, the impact is the same. Once a particular perspective is built into the laws, norms and mores of a society, it becomes part of the "the way things are." As such, Whiteness is defined as a part of human condition and it defines normality. Rather than actively refusing to comply with the law, individuals usually go along with the "norm," particularly if they think the law doesn't affect them personally. In summary, Whiteness functions as a large ensemble of practices and rules that give White people all sorts of small and large advantages in life, many privileges, and a major reason people have trouble giving it up (Jay, 1998).

White privilege is the ability to make decisions that affect everyone without taking others into account, and White people[4] set standards of humanity by which they are bound to succeed and others are bound to fail. Most of this is not done deliberately and maliciously. However, what they do is not seen as "Whiteness" but rather "normal." White privilege has nothing to do with whether or not an individual is "good" or not. Whites can be rude or unkind and still enjoy White privileges. At the same time, people of colour can be the most wonderful, giving, and brilliant individuals and yet they may not enjoy the same unearned privileges. Privileges are bestowed on Whites by the institutions with which they interact solely because of their Whiteness, and not because they are deserving as individuals (Hartigan, 2004). Often, it is not the intent of a White person to make use of the unearned benefits they have received on the basis of their skin colour. In fact, many go through their day-to-day activities unaware that they are even White or that race matters. In fact, many White students and faculty will argue that they don't have *any* privilege because of their Whiteness. Throughout Canadian history, White power-holders, acting on behalf of society, have made decisions that have affected White people as a group differently than groups of people of colour. White privilege allows people *not* to see race in themselves, and to be angry with those who do. Overall, Whites generally tend to live in the centre, while people of colour often live on the margins (Lopez, 2005).

Evidence of this can be found in Canada in the contents of the *British North America Act*, written by men believing that "our destiny" was to own the land

previously was occupied by Aboriginal people, by removing First Nation's children from their homes and placing them in schools, and later, by placing First Nations' children in White foster homes and by manipulating immigration laws so that people of colour (e.g., Chinese, South Asians) were less free to immigrate to Canada than White Western Europeans. Everywhere we look, we can find Whiteness at the centre of Canadian society. Moreover, this perspective has been in operation for well over five centuries. However, with the recent entry of greater numbers of visible minorities into Canada (they now make up 13 percent of the total Canadian population), the issue of White privilege has become a topic of discussion. In summary, White people's privileges are bestowed on them prenatally, such that one cannot acquire them through behaviour, nor can one give them away no matter how much that individual may not want them.

WHITE INVISIBILITY

Whites do not recognize or acknowledge their unearned racial privileges because Whiteness operates by being invisible, so ubiquitous and entrenched as to appear natural and normative. As noted earlier, Whiteness operates as the unmarked norm against which other identities are marked and realized. On the other hand, while Whiteness is invisible to Whites, it is hyper-visible to people of colour who are always aware of Whiteness (Rothenberg, 2000).

Whiteness is a standpoint, a location from which to see and evaluate other individuals, ourselves, and the way institutions are organized. It is a product of history and is a relational category. However, Whites can, with extraordinary ease, slide from awareness of Whiteness to the lack thereof (Rasmussen et al., 2001.). White people rarely see their White privilege. The invisibility of these assets is part of the sense that Whiteness does not exist. White culture and identity have, as it were, no content and, having no content, White people can't acknowledge that they have anything that accounts for their position of privilege and power (Lipsitz, 2006). In the end, White people have created the dominant images of the world and cannot believe that they have constructed the world in their own image.

This sense of invisibility is a significant and taken-for-granted advantage for Whites in their day-to-day behaviour. Whites never have to speak for their race, not being viewed as the "White" teacher or lawyer. Moreover, non-Whites seldom see themselves as broadly represented in the media and educational curriculum (Doane, 1997). For example, I cannot remember ever reading a newspaper article in which the writer identified a "White community." Non-White students have to deal with the above issues and they experience, as a result, an important social and psychological cost. The advantage of being White is not to have to absorb this cost, nor even having to be aware of the benefits being received. This invisibility of Whiteness as a racial position in White discourse is of prime importance in analyzing how Whiteness provides a context for determining our behaviour (Dyer, 1992).

BARRIERS TO COMMUNICATION

Whiteness operates as a social force in mobilizing how people act and interact as well as in the ways they think of themselves and others (Nakayama & Martin, 2003). Moreover, Whiteness serves as a barrier to communication between Whites and non-Whites, making it difficult to effectively communicate and to resolve real or perceived differences. Furthermore, the hidden nature of Whiteness and White privilege enables Whites to participate in White racism that permits both individuals and structures to operate without calling it to the attention of anyone (Jensen, 2005). If Whites see themselves as the cultural centre of society, then the identities and cultural practices of others become something "different" that needs to be changed in order to claim full membership in the context, in the classroom, for example.

People of colour are expected to conform to the unspoken values of Whiteness, yet this is impossible because it is based on race. As long as Whiteness goes unacknowledged, anyone of colour will have difficulty in conforming. Much of White identity production swirls around the creation and maintenance of the dark "Other" against which their own Whiteness and "goodness" is necessarily understood. The social construction of this goodness, then, provides moral justification for privileged standpoints (Weis et al., 1997).

We also find that White people exhibit the optics of listening when dealing with people of colour. When people of colour try to make a point with Whites during a conversation, Whites have the ability and privilege to not understand the message being sent. Whites enjoy the privilege of assuming that they know best for everybody, and they may do what they want to do anyway. In many cases, people of colour will stop saying anything (invoking silence) that is then interpreted by Whites as agreeing with them. Besides silencing visible minorities, including Aboriginal people, most White educators are seldom aware that they have silenced the dialogue, and the silence is in no way a tacit agreement. Whites, both teachers and students, simply believe that their colleagues or fellow students of colour did, in the end, agree with them. After all, they stopped disagreeing (Delpit, 1988).

Whites control what others know about their own histories by presenting only parts of a story since Whites determine how and if historical characters and events will be remembered. For example, stories in our history books are replete with tales of White "battles" with Aboriginals versus "massacres" carried out by Aboriginals. The practice of "scalping" is generally associated with barbarous Aboriginal behaviour but it was actually introduced by Europeans who wanted to eradicate Aboriginals. Our knowledge of the Japanese internment during WWII is from the White perspective. We almost always forget that everything that happens in our lives occurs in the context of the supremacy of Whiteness, (e.g., being admitted to university, finding employment, and being able to live comfortably where one wants to).

We have been able to delude ourselves into thinking that all people come to the table having been dealt the same hand of cards and having played on a level playing

field. We act as if there are no remnants of slavery that affect Black Canadians, that Japanese Canadians did not have to give up their businesses and assets, that Aboriginals did not have to give up their land or be denied access to the economy. Moreover, Whites can have a conversation about "race" without being questioned about their loyalty or being called an "Oreo," "Banana," "Apple," or "Coconut." In the end, Whites can speak up about racism without being seen as self-serving. In fact, some Whites are benefiting from the cottage industry known as multicultural training by speaking about racism.

EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

The *National Center for Education* (1999) has reported that over 80 percent of public school teachers throughout the country are White, while almost 40 percent of the students in public primary, secondary, and post-secondary schools are visible minorities. Moreover, the proportion of ethnically and linguistically diverse teachers is growing smaller as the diversity of the student population continues to grow (Sleeter, 2001). As such, there is a major "mismatch" between a teaching force that is White and a student population that is composed more and more of students of colour and non-native English/French speakers. As Cross (2003) notes, there is an enormous gap between post-secondary educational institutions that prepare teachers and who they will likely teach. This mismatch has resulted in a significant detachment of White teacher educators and White teacher education students from the children of colour who are in their classroom. Moreover, we find that predominantly our formal White educational institutions have generally responded very slowly to the growing racial and cultural gaps.

The intent of this brief introduction is to sensitize the reader to the issue of power differential, an example of "normed" positions and the invisibility of Whiteness. But how does this work out in the classroom and related interaction between students and professors? My focus on this issue will be on the post-secondary educational system since that is where I have worked for the past three decades. But more importantly, how does this "play out" in the classroom with a college/university environment?

White teachers need to undergo a profound shift, from viewing the world through a lens of dominance to a commitment to equitably shared power and resources (Dei, et al., 2006). To effectively counteract the pull and absorption of White privilege beliefs and behaviour of teachers, teachers need to understand how young people develop and react to racial identity and awareness as well as attitudes about race. Researchers have noted that, at a young age, White children begin to understand the power codes or rules of "White ways are right" (Ramsey, 2004; Ramsey & Williams, 2003). To be White in Canada means you do not have to think about differences or race. This invisibility of Whiteness leads to a general social tendency to assume that Whites do not have a "race" and diverts attention and analysis to "others" who do have a race (Doane, 1997). Most White teachers are unlikely to be reminded of social and cultural differences on a day-to-day basis. In fact, we find that White Canadian

culture and practices are built into the post-secondary educational institutions and structures of Canadian life. The content of such educational institutions generally reflect White Euro-Canadian perspectives and standards.

WHITENESS IN THE CLASSROOM: A PERSONAL REFLECTION

Thirty years ago, when I first started teaching, I would look out into the classroom and it was predominantly young White males. While an occasional visible minority person would be in the class, by and large the class was White. Today, as I get ready for the next semester, I can count on a majority of the students in my class to be female, a sizeable number of the class to be a member of a visible minority group, and the age variation will range from 18 to 80 years.

When I arrived in the city of Calgary, it was a small prairie centre with roots in the oil and gas industry. The demographic make up of the city was nearly all White. Ethnic culinary choices ranged between "surf and turf" and Chinese food. Ethnic diversity was something that was happening elsewhere in the world and the few Blacks that one saw in the city were more than likely to be a member of the local professional football team. In all respects it was a White city. While the city is one of the fastest growing cities in the country, until the 1970s this growth came from nearby provinces or the United States. Also, all of the "immigrants" migrating to Calgary were White. Today the world has changed for Canadian educators.

What I find today is that many of my classes bifurcate along the line of "speakers" and "listeners." Within the speakers group, they are further divided into "seekers" and "challengers." Seekers are those individuals who require additional information to complete their understanding of the topic under discussion in the classroom. The seekers are simply trying to obtain additional information to fill gaps they feel they need to more fully grasp the complexities of the topic or achieve a better understanding of the material. The "voice" of seekers is generally directed toward that of obtaining clarification, additional information, or ensuring they are not misunderstanding the information presented. On the other hand, there are the challengers who adopt a more "confrontational" stance to the issue under discussion during class. Their challenges may or may not be ideologically based or theoretically relevant and, in many cases, it is difficult to sort this out. Nevertheless, these speakers feel it necessary to interact, question, and challenge the basic assumptions or conclusions being discussed in the classroom.

Those who are White tend to make up the speakers, while it has been my experience that generally the listeners in my class include all the visible minority members. In most classrooms I have taught or been a visitor in, I find that visible minority members seldom speak and rarely do they challenge their instructor. Moreover, I find that members of visible minorities tend to segregate themselves (or are covertly pushed into a segregated environment) both in and outside the classroom. What has always been of interest to me is the learning process and experience for those silent voices.

What happens in a class where there is a majority of visible minority students? Do they set new norms? Will the White students allow it? What are the interaction patterns of the class? Will the "silent voices" come forward? Can an instructor, through conscious intervention in the classroom, address the above questions and give voice to students of colour? Or do White instructors, willingly or not, reinforce Whiteness?

Over the years I have noticed that sometimes the class was vocal and articulate while at other times there were only a few students who spoke. As I reflected upon the ethnic makeup of each class, I began to see the picture as described above. As such, I began to search for ways to stimulate dialogue in the class, trying to ensure it was more inclusive for all members. For example, I began to break my class into small working groups and ensured that some groups were comprised of a majority of visible minority members. In these cases, I found that the listeners now turned into speakers and they occasionally would take on the "challenger" role. Miraculously, individuals from groups having a majority of visible minority members became articulate speakers who had no trouble in challenging the instructor or their colleagues in the classroom. How could such a transformation take place? What happened that allowed previously silent visible minority individuals to become articulate speakers?

My explanation is that the White normative position of the group was no longer appropriate as the "norm," and that members of the visible minority group established a new norm reflecting their own experiences. As such, the old rule of "White makes right" no longer applied to this setting, and new norms emerged that liberated visible minority students and gave them voice. At the same time, White students resented the new norm. Although they did not directly challenge the right of visible minority individuals in the class, they begin to look for alternatives to resist and to show resistance. Some of the White members of the class would request a transfer to another work-group and provide rationales such as "members of the group don't listen" or "members of the group don't take instructions." In other cases, White students would not show up for the group activities, citing conflicting commitments (e.g., family obligations or work commitments). It is clear that the establishment of new norms made White students uncomfortable. Their sense of superiority had been challenged and they were reluctant to acknowledge the challenge. What remains to be seen is whether or not these new norms that allow the individual of colour to speak can carry over to other classes and non-classroom situations. Of equal importance, do other visible minority students view the new "speakers" as mentors and role models that they aspire to emulate? Do visible minority students facilitate a richer and more in depth analysis of Whiteness so that White students are engaged in the dialogue?

I have found that, in order for teachers to be effective in their teaching efforts, they must first recognize and understand their own world views, as only then will they be able to understand the world views of their students (Marx, 2004). I also have found that most of my colleagues are not interested in discussing the role of Whiteness in the classroom. As such, it will typically be difficult to look to your

colleagues to help support your inquiry on how you need to reconstruct your classes to deal with the privilege of Whiteness.[5] I have found, however, that one of the first steps White teachers need to take is to inform themselves of the concept of "White privilege," because many White people will argue they have never been bestowed the benefits of being White. White teachers need to see themselves as White, to see their particularity. In short, Whiteness needs to be made "strange." Most White teachers are unknowingly beneficiaries of White privilege (Gidluck & Dwyer, 2006) and resist the notion that they benefit from being White. When White teachers fail to acknowledge their own racial identity, this lack of acknowledgement becomes a barrier for understanding and connecting with the developmental needs of students of colour (Gordon, 2005).

Second, instructors need to appreciate that students of colour tend to bring rich experiences and perspectives to teaching, regardless of whether they are in arts and science, humanities, or education departments (Sleeter, 2001). This richness and these differential perspectives need to be fully utilized in teaching and learning about the subject matter. I teach in the area of statistics and methodology and I have found this richness of diversity stimulates a number of topics covered in the class. Teachers must not forget that the reason they teach is to explore both mundane as well as alien ideas. The goal of such activity is to expand our understanding of the diversity of human thought and *not* to expand our own specific hegemonic ways of thinking (Cordova, 2004).

Third, White teachers must understand the importance of context in order to properly understand that which lies outside her/his own context (Wittgenstein, 1968). Teachers cannot pretend that they can interpret a particular idea from an alien context without understanding that context. To do so without a grounded understanding will surely lead to misinterpretation and misunderstanding. Within the post-secondary educational context, to use such a strategy will result in only other White teachers having similar understandings that may or may not be accurate reflections of reality. White teachers will create "answers" to questions that are similar to other White teachers and have little linkage to non-White students. White teachers must be aware of the assumptions they bring to such interpretations, both in and out of the classroom. In the end, White teachers must address Wittgenstein's (1968) insistence on context as a source of meaning.

DISCUSSION

Why do White teachers not change regarding their perceptions, activities, and relations with students in their classroom? First of all, in assigning gains and losses with regard to change, it is often relative to the *status quo*. In addition, when teachers assess the prospects of future events, losses usually loom intuitively larger than gains. Finally, teachers experience an endowment effect where present and/ or past experiences are given higher values than future prospects. As such, most White teachers define the transition from the *status quo* to a gain of some sort as not

valued in the same way as the transition from the *status quo* to the loss of something (Schmid, 2006). As a result of such framing, outcomes deviating from the *status quo* tend to be evaluated in more negative terms and viewed as losses rather than gains.

Colour-blindness is neither blindness, nor an inability to see colour. Rather, it is a refusal, or what has been called "White resistance to seeing" (Helfand, 2006). This resistance is learned and nurtured to protect the *status quo* that privileges White people and occurs on both the individual and systemic levels. At the individual level, it allows for teachers to absolve oneself of racism. The systemic level of colour-blindness denies the institutionally mandated privileges and discriminatory practices associated with ethnicity. It denies the system of rules, procedures, and beliefs that result in Whites collectively maintaining control. Our education system perpetuates the pervasiveness of Whiteness and the passivity of White racism by failing to challenge and by reproducing this pervasiveness and passivity. By neither questioning nor challenging the neutrality of the White perspective, most post-secondary educational institutions and colleges of education silently condone it. This is so powerful it may indirectly carry more educational significance than the official curriculum. White teachers tend to focus on the individual level of colour-blindness that focuses on personal and professional dispositions, and becomes a good way of avoiding examining racism on the systemic level. It becomes a way to validate ourselves as "good" people without having to relinquish the privileges that we receive from the existing system (Gordon, 2005). Teachers must remember that Whiteness gives us advantages, some subtle and some obvious, some overt, some covert, some material, and some ideological.

Whiteness is an issue that challenges White teachers, and yet few have tried to come to grips with it. As White teachers, there is a tendency to shore up our sense of superiority, and I find myself never fully able to escape from an entrenched sense of White superiority. At the same time, students of colour understand how White professors' stereotypes impinge upon their performance in the class. White teachers have to take seriously trying to understand what it means for people of colour to live in a racialized world. Unfortunately, many White teachers try to maintain their status of "innocence" by not seeing their participation as privileged. However, there are many situations when actions by students and or White teaches can rupture the *status quo* and force them to experience a dissolution of a singular "moral self." White teachers need to work toward and recognize such events, and allow them to happen, rather than trying to "manage" the discomfort, or otherwise avoid discussion of these issues. These rupturing educative events can be profound teaching moments and create a new awareness of White people's complicity in perpetuating privilege and dominance, and can force teachers into accepting greater accountability for their positions of privilege. In the end, I am struck with my own naivety, discomfort, and lack of skill at responding to the issue of Whiteness, and with my students' attitudes about Whiteness and/or race, in ways that are truly effective in helping all students. However, I continue to struggle to deal with and confront students whose ignorance exposes my own.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. How would you know if Whiteness is a factor in silencing the voice of students in your class?
2. How do you deal with a student who makes a racist statement in the class, whether or not he or she is aware of it?
3. Can you name ten White Canadians and ten non-White Canadians who have made a major contribution to science, culture, and life of Canada (excluding sports figures)?
4. Do all White students benefit from Whiteness? Explain your answer.
5. How does Whiteness emerge in any of your class readings? Provide examples.

NOTES

[1] The term "race" is not being used in a biological sense. Rather it refers to the socially defined set of attributes (usually phenotypic) that people use to categorize people. It is a term that refers to the social construction of social and biological attributes that allow people to place individuals into broad biological groupings referred to as "races."

[2] Skin colour recognition is our first functioning perceptual system. Skin is a signed façade and is one of the first sign systems we learn to read (Taylor, 2005).

[3] We use terms such as "race," "colour," and "visible minority" interchangeably. However, it should be noted that in Canada, the term "visible minority" is a legal term and 13 ethno-cultural groups, excluding Aboriginals, are included in the legal definition.

[4] It should be noted that social class is an important factor in differentiating White privilege as not all Whites benefit the same.

[5] The implications for faculty obtaining tenure, carrying out research and student evaluations of their courses is noteworthy. However this is a subject for another time and place.

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