

## REFRAMING: HERBERT C. NORTHCOTT (2014)

In this reframing exercise, I will discuss briefly four topics: writing a chapter on “aging and ethnicity,” being white in Mexico, “white lies,” and (un)parallel White and Aboriginal lives.

First, during 2012, I worked on a chapter on “Ethnicity and Aging” for the seventh edition of a Canadian social gerontology textbook. This new chapter was an addition to a long-standing textbook (Novak, Campbell, & Northcott, 2013) that had gone through six editions previously without a chapter focusing on ethnicity and aging. As I worked on the chapter, I wrestled with the issue of race. I wondered if the chapter should be titled “Race, Ethnicity, and Aging.” However, reviewers of the initial outline of the chapter had warned that race was a problematic construct. Further, I had the notion in my mind that if Canadians are to de-construct racism, writers have to stop re-creating it in academic discourse. I wrestled with a dilemma; it seemed to me that highlighting race perpetuated racism but ignoring race perpetuated White privilege.

While working on the chapter, I noted that in Canada authors of official publications no longer used the term “race.” Instead, non-White persons were termed “visible minorities,” as if Whites were invisible. Of course, the term visible minority is a euphemism for race. Ironically, the Canadian government excludes Canadian Aboriginals from the definition of the term visible minority. Nevertheless, I refused to organize the chapter around the racialized constructs of “visible minorities” and “Aboriginal peoples.” Instead I focused on ethno-cultural diversity and let race enter the discussion in terms of cultural diversity rather than skin colour. Nevertheless, the chapter tends to highlight the cultural diversity of culturally exotic others and once again falls into the trap of privileging Whiteness by taking White culture as the standard against which all others are contrasted and evaluated.

Second, I spent the month of August 2012 as a visiting professor at a university in Mexico near Mexico City. I was struck by the lack of racial and cultural diversity in Mexico. Being White (and not speaking Spanish) made me stand out. Nevertheless, I was only called “Gringo” twice (that I know of), the second time partly in jest. Being visibly White in Mexico contrasted my experiences with being invisibly White in Canada. One gracious Mexican colleague passed me the maple syrup at breakfast without my asking and then reflectively commented on his acting on a stereotype about Canadians. As un-Canadian as it is to admit it, I don’t particularly like maple syrup.

This brings me to my third point. We all have myths we believe about racialized ethno-cultural others. Steckley (2009) explores this notion by reviewing various myths that White people tend to “know” about the Inuit. Steckley examines how these myths came into existence and how they continue to be perpetuated. Steckley calls

this mythic knowledge “White lies.” When teaching First Nations students, I was struck by some of the myths First Nations people had about White people. I suppose we all tell “lies” about the other. We also tell lies about ourselves. “White lies,” then, encompass the lies White people tell about others but also the lies White people tell about themselves.

A Dene elder spoke to a class recently at the University of Alberta. As he told his stories, I realized that he and I were born in the same year (1947) and in the same country (Canada). Nevertheless, I was struck by the drastic differences in the lives we had lived. We had lived very (un)parallel lives. This is my fourth point.

The Dene elder had been separated from his family at an early age and forced to attend residential school. There he witnessed and experienced abuses that over a half century later he could only speak of with great emotion. I went to school in Winnipeg and have pleasant memories of my family, friends, schoolmates, and teachers, of whom none abused me in any significant way. He spoke of his later adolescence and adult years as a traumatized search for himself. He spoke of his anger and even rage as a young man and the distraction and damage of alcohol abuse. As a young man, I had no real difficulty finding my way. I went to university and started a career as a professor. In time he became an elder and his difficult life experiences formed the basis of his wisdom. Of seven whom he was close to in his early years, four “did not make it,” dying prematurely. My brothers and sisters and most of my friends went on to live healthy and successful lives. It seems ironic to observe that he was one of the lucky ones. My “luck” as a privileged White person tends to be taken for granted.

#### REFERENCES

- Novak, M., Campbell, L., & Northcott, H. C. (2013). *Aging and society: A Canadian perspective* (7th ed.). Toronto, ON: Nelson Education.
- Steckley, J. L. (2009). *White lies about the Inuit*. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.