

# Teaching Our Own Racism

## Incorporating Personal Narratives of Whiteness Into Anti-Racist Practice

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**Abstract:** Anti-racist pedagogy typically focuses on helping learners identify and counter racist ideas and actions they detect in themselves and others. Sympathetically and skillfully, the leader of this activity is charged with helping people detect subtle racism as evident in racial micro-aggressions and aversive racism. This pedagogic process is crucial and valuable, but risks avoiding a powerful dynamic of how educators can use their own personal, autobiographical experience to model how they themselves struggle to detect and immobilize (as much as that is possible) racist instincts in themselves. If racism is understood as a learned ideology, then it is reasonable to expect that even adult educators committed to dismantling racism have internalized aspects of this ideology. Instead of trying to purge themselves of these, conceal, or damp them down, an alternative educational approach is to make these racist inclinations public and to engage learners in a consideration of how to recognize and challenge these.

**Keywords:** teaching, racism, narrative, pedagogy, self-disclosure

As a participant in diversity and anti-racist professional development workshops over the years, I noticed a particular dynamic at play.

“EVEN THE MOST EXPERIENCED WHITE ANTI-RACIST EDUCATORS ARE LIKELY TO HAVE ELEMENTS OF THE LEARNED IDEOLOGY OF RACISM LIVING WITHIN THEM.”

The workshop is designed to help participants learn about cultural and racial difference and to help them be more alert to ways they fall into reproducing racist behaviors by perpetuating cultural stereotypes and holding inaccurate assumptions about different racial groups. The underlying assumption is through education and self-reflection people can learn to work in ways free of racist undertones. Anti-racist and

diversity education is something done to you, by those who have cracked the code of cultural misunderstandings and who have come out the other side of struggling with racism to a point where they can now teach others how to think and work in non-racist ways.

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The European–American Collaborative Challenging Whiteness (ECCW, 2010) in San Francisco challenges this paradigm. The Collaborative has met monthly for the last 16 years to examine how Whites can educate each other, and themselves, about White supremacy. The members note how the desire to be seen as *good White people*, “who act as effective allies to people of color by challenging the injustices of white hegemony and privilege” (ECCW, 2010, p. 146), permeates so much of anti-racist education. Paradoxically, as the ECCW (2010) notes, “this desire to be and be seen as a good white person often leads each of us to behaviors that have the opposite effect of what we intend” (p. 147).

From examining their own personal experiences, the ECCW (2010) members note two common mistakes committed when Whites try to teach each other about race and racism. The first is proselytizing, “exhorting in an officious and tiresome way” (ECCW, 2010, p. 146) to other Whites the need for anti-racism which results in those on the receiving end become defensive or shut down entirely. In the zeal to educate people about racism, proselytizers end up bringing anti-racist endeavors into disrepute. The second error is disdain, treating less racially *enlightened* colleagues as objects of scorn to be pitied or condemned. Disdaining is rarely overt in my experience, but rather the sending of a subtle message you are one of the many who *just do not get it* in contrast to the racially cognizant elite few who have cracked the code of how to be non-racist.

As soon as I read the ECCW’s (2010) analyses of these errors, I recognized my own commission of these exact same behaviors. A full disclosure of how the ideology of White supremacy was alive and well within me was missing from my practice. Instead of educating people from a supposed position of racial cognizance, I really needed to talk openly about my struggle with my racism. Slowly, I came to understand education about racism was often best done through narrative disclosure, rather than sharing tips and techniques of what did or did not work.

Pedagogically, I now think of anti-racist education as being as much about teaching our own racism as it is about scrutinizing curricula, institutional policies, and organizational practices for evidence of structural disenfranchisement. If racism is understood as a

learned ideology, something that pervades everyday speech, media images, peer group learning, and family dynamics, then it is surely reasonable to expect even adult educators committed to dismantling racism have internalized aspects of this ideology.

In this article, I argue even the most experienced White anti-racist educators are likely to have elements of the learned ideology of racism living within them. Instead of trying to purge themselves of these, conceal them, or damp them down, an alternative educational approach is to make these racist inclinations public and engage learners in a consideration of how to recognize and challenge these. This approach uses adult educators’ own attempts to model a critical analysis of their learned racism. It asks questions such as (a) How have we learned racism from dominant ideology? (b) How do our racist impulses continue to manifest themselves in our actions? (c) What are ways we can identify these? (d) How are our racist leanings interrupted by disruptive experience? and (e) How do we challenge and push back against them?

## Learning Racism

As with all Whites in Britain, I grew up in a world in which Whiteness, and all things White, was taken as the *natural* order of things. I have six decades of ideological conditioning into White Supremacy and, as a result, I do not expect it ever to leave me. Attitudes and beliefs I picked up in my childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood included Blacks were alternatively lazy, happy, or violent; Pakistanis and Indians were sexually irresponsible having large families; and Gypsies were thieves out to mark your house as an easy target. White supremacy was not without complications. For example, the White Irish were portrayed as lazy, drunken brawlers, with a markedly inferior IQ.

These stereotypes were earned through jokes with peers, family conversations, and media images. They flourished in the vacuum of no contact with anyone other than Whites like me. I do not think I had a conversation with a Black person until I was 18 years old. Furthermore, this ideology of White supremacy rarely named itself as such. Overt declarations of White racial superiority were rare and, while learning racist attitudes, I engaged in apparently anti-racist acts. For example, as an undergraduate, I participated in

demonstrations against the South African Rugby team representing the then South African apartheid regime. But external behavior often masks learned instincts, and so it was with me.

External events sometimes challenged the power of this ideology. At the age of 17, in Banbury High Street one Friday night, I was beaten up by a gang of White youths (they were *rockers*; I was a *mod*). A Black American GI serviceman, from Upper Heyford Air Force base, crossed the street and broke up the fight telling us, “everybody’s got to be cool now.” This pivotal event disrupted the White Supremacist script forming in my head that said, “Black people are violent and start fights and White people are peacemakers who sometimes have to use force to reign in Black instigators of violence.” Here was a stunning role reversal that made a big impression on me and represented what Critical Race Theory (CRT) calls a counter-story.

But, despite disruptive moments and events such as these, White Supremacy moves in me as it does in all Whites. First, my skin color means, for my whole career, I am not only used to seeing people who look like me as gatekeepers in adult education, but I suppose I am also one of those gatekeepers, continuing the unproblematized White Supremacy norm. For example, I question my right to publish something. White epistemology is something bred into my neural synapses. Racism—the ugly operationalization of the ideology of White supremacy—moves in me in ways that constantly catch me by surprise. I see a Black pilot enter the cockpit of the plane and catch myself thinking, “Will this flight be safe?” Interestingly, Nelson Mandela (1994) writes about having the same reaction.

In classes, I catch myself not challenging students of color and realize my so-called *empathy*, desire to be an ally, masks an embedded racist consciousness, which says, “*They* can’t take a *strong* challenge from a White person.” The ECCW (2010) notes how Whites often withhold their contributions in multi-racial dialogues, so as not to be seen as enacting White supremacy. This implies the White voice is so powerful that it will eclipse all others, but withholding leaves colleagues of color wondering what Whites are thinking.

Clearly, racism moves in me. I find myself quickly granting paper extensions to Black students. I assume

it springs from a White Supremacist judgment that, because Black students are not as intelligent as White students, of course, they will need more time to complete their work. I keep silent in a presentation given by a scholar of color because (so my internal calculus goes) my voice is so powerful it will diminish the presenter’s voice. It is deeply sobering to realize the ideological conditioning of White supremacy is so strong and enduring.

### The Use of Narrative Modeling

I grew up suspicious of the use of narrative, storytelling, as I would have described it. Storytelling was something that was entertaining, but essentially fictional. It was not academic, chiefly because it was clearly subjective and a-theoretical. It took me a long time to realize narrative as one of the most compelling pedagogic approaches I can use. Nothing draws people more quickly into considering challenging information and perspectives than a personal story. Dissertations that are scholarly personal narratives (Nash & Bradley, 2011) are often far more likely to influence practice than third person research reports.

Whenever I have a pedagogic aim of teaching about the pervasive nature of racism, I work from the position that, before I can ask others to explore how it lives within them, I need to engage in self-disclosure of how it lives within me. I begin by defining some constituent ideological elements of White supremacy and proceed to show how each flourishes within me. Let me describe three of these.

### Whites are Natural Gatekeepers

This first idea seeps its way insidiously into our consciousness. It does not assert itself as an overt injunction, as in *you must be white to be editor of this journal, winner of this award, compiler of this handbook*. Rather, a chief indicator of the White gatekeeper role’s power is revealed in the instinctive surprise we experience when we come across a gatekeeper who is not White.

When uncovering this ideology, I usually start by talking about those who, in a four-decade career, have been my boss. Not one person of color has been in a position of direct authority over me. Every dean, department head, principal, president, and book editor I have worked with has been White like me. I have no

model of a person of color who has exercised gatekeeper power or influence over me.

I then talk about my own gatekeeper role. I now find myself in the role of mentor to junior faculty, several of whom are colleagues of color, who are trying to publish. As Endowed Chair, the top of the professorial hierarchy, I am in the position of the White power broker and ally while still being in thrall to learned racist ideology in an overwhelmingly White field. I talk about how I try to deal with this contradiction. I try not to set any agenda with my mentee, instead asking mentees what their agendas and goals are and how they feel I could be of help. I never agree to a mentoring role unless asked to do so by the mentee, even though superiors have sometimes wanted to foist me on colleagues they see as underperforming.

At the outset, I try to acknowledge my own identity as a White, European American, and how the rules of the game have been set up to help me. If a junior colleague wishes to play this game of publish or perish, I am more than willing to help them. I do not try to pretend I can, in any way, draw on my struggles to get to my position as a way of understanding theirs. I do not insist they call me *Stephen*, which is what I am most comfortable with and would much prefer. The *Dr. Brookfield* or *Professor Brookfield* I am usually called is always a reminder of the power differential between us.

### **Colleagues of Color Need Special Help and Assistance—They Cannot Make It Without a *White* Ally**

One of the dynamics the ECCW (2010) describes is the need for *good* Whites to be seen as an ally. Whenever I hear White colleagues declare themselves as allies, I cringe; though I try to keep the cringe internal. Displaying it openly is a clear act of disdain in the way the ECCW identifies this. I would like to be considered an ally, but the designation of ally is not ever ours to make. I understand the naming of me in that way is not in my hands. Instead, I often begin any discussion of being an ally by declaring my core assumptions that a person of color will never trust me, and this should have no bearing on my readiness to work in ways that seem anti-racist. I also own up to my

belief that I should never expect to be acknowledged or thanked for this kind of work.

One of the things I talk about is my own practice of interacting with colleagues and students of color. I talk about my withholding behaviors, of not speaking for fear of seeming authoritarian or racist. I remember the first time I worked with a group in which African American students were present. Whenever one woman spoke, I would remain studiously silent, congratulating myself on my empathic support. One day, this student pulled me aside and asked why I never responded to her comments in classroom discussion. She was visibly upset with what she saw as my disinterest in her views. This supposed act of an *ally* actually increased her perception of the power I held over her.

I also describe my experiences working in multi-racial teaching teams. I am known as something of a soft touch for any tale of woe, but particular for tales told by students of color. For years, I would unhesitatingly grant extensions and push back deadlines for any such student who asked. My rationale was White institutions needed to bend over backward to make allowances for students who had not had the privilege of a rigorous academic training. Although I always tried to grade in a *color-blind* way, I felt much more pressure to round up a score for a student of color compared with a White student.

But when working in multi-racial teams, it quickly became apparent my teammates of color behaved very differently. They were much less ready to grant extensions and would ask me why I graded a student of color so generously. I began to realize behaviors I imagined were in some way contributing to anti-racist pedagogy could actually indicate a deeply ingrained racism. I assumed, without stopping to question, students of color were incapable of handling the same full-blown critique I would make of White students' work. Furthermore, I assumed students of color could not reach the same standards of excellence as White students; so, I should *go easy* on them, bumping up their mark whenever I was in doubt about the merits of a piece of work. In essence, I was giving marks for showing up and for the sheer fact of handing something in, irrespective of the quality of the work, in a way I would never do for White students.

## Uncovering Racial Micro-Aggressions

One of the most useful concepts I have stumbled across in the last few years has been that of racial micro-aggressions. Popularized by Derald Wing Sue (2010), micro-aggressions are the small acts of exclusion and marginalization committed by a dominant group toward a minority. They are never overt or explicit, nothing as obvious as using a racist epithet or telling a person of color to shut up. The two constituent defining elements of a micro-aggression underscore this subtlety. First, receivers of micro-aggressions are usually left wondering, “Did that really happen?” “Should we be offended by that?” or “Did he/she mean to be insulting?” Second, when enactors of micro-aggressions are confronted with their actions, they typically, and in a sense quite honestly, deny there was any aggressive intent. They explain, with full sincerity, no exclusion or diminution was planned and the receiver is indeed imagining things. They will explain their action away by saying they had a temporary moment of forgetfulness or they got their words mixed up.

The key point is micro-aggressions are not ever consciously intended to diminish a person of color. Instead, they are so ingrained in the repertoire of daily behaviors we use to manage interpersonal interactions—the tone of voice we use, the gestures we make, where we direct eye contact, the analogies that unconsciously suggest themselves, the jokes we use, the shorthand terms we use—that we never experience them as deliberately focused on insulting someone. In this sense, they are truly ideological, so fully assimilated as to be unnoticeable until someone brings them to our attention.

I see racial and gender micro-aggressions everywhere and always try to use my own commission of these as the starting point for examining this concept. I begin a class or workshop by sharing my most recent micro-aggressions. Let me give two examples. During a discussion, I asked all the students in an academic class on leadership to give their preliminary *take* on an issue the course was examining. After hearing from each student, I summarized what I felt were the main themes and differences revealed in the discussion. On finishing my summary, a student raised her hand and said I had missed one member of the group, a young Asian American woman. I was

momentarily flustered, apologized, and invited the overlooked student to speak.

During the coffee break, I thought the incident over and realized it was a classic example of a micro-aggression. I certainly had no plans to exclude this student. I had not come to class thinking, “I must make certain student A doesn’t have the chance to speak.” And, had I been confronted with my behavior in the moment, I would have denied any exclusionary intent. When I returned to class, I began the session by apologizing again and saying what the students had just witnessed was a classic example of a racial micro-aggression. A representative of the dominant culture had unknowingly and unwittingly marginalized someone from a community of color.

One of the White students told me not to be so hard on myself and said I was reading far too much into a momentary lapse of forgetfulness. I explained micro-aggressions are never intended. Instead, they are ingrained, seemingly instinctive behaviors that represent years of unconscious assimilation and socialization. They are ideological in the sense that they become part of our daily repertoire, behavioral minutiae that actually represent a socially ordered system of structural inequality. At this point, the student I had overlooked spoke up and said the same thing had happened to her in every class she had taken at the university. Her experience had been that of being repeatedly ignored.

The second example occurred in a professional development workshop I was running. The participants were leaders within their own organization. We convened for a day to examine, among other things, ways in which the organization could provide more inclusive services. At one point in the day, we talked about the influence of machismo in sport and how this connected to homophobic attitudes. I volunteered there was only one openly Gay athlete in U.S. professional sports, Robbie Rogers of the LA Galaxy soccer team.

A woman at the training immediately spoke up saying, “you mean the first gay *male* athlete” and pointed out the presence of openly gay female basketball players, including the lucrative Nike sponsorship deal signed by Brittney Griner, the top pick in the 2013 basketball draft. We then mentioned top tennis players of the past, such as Billie Jean King and Martina Navratilova. This was a wonderful example

of a micro-aggression reflecting gender and patriarchy. Here I was, the paid outside *expert* leading a workshop on inclusivity, supposedly aware of a whole range of race, class, and gender inequities, and I had never thought about women as I was discussing professional sports. In effect, I had dismissed half the human race without ever thinking about it!

### Modeling Push Back Through Team Teaching

One of the problems trying to work in anti-racist ways is the lack of examples of what an honest conversation across racial differences looks like. Exhortations to conduct dialog across difference are frequent, but actual instances of this are rare. In my own work, I rarely get the chance to talk publicly with colleagues from different racial and cultural backgrounds about how our racial identities enter our exchanges and work practices. However, for several years, I was an adjunct faculty member in the adult education doctoral program at National Louis University in Chicago, where I regularly team-taught courses with Scipio A.J. Colin Jr. III, an Africentric theorist, and the late Elizabeth Peterson, both African American faculty members.

In our team teaching, we would often talk about how our own racial identities framed the ways we negotiated decisions, used different teaching approaches, and influenced how we responded to students' requests. Dr. C (as Scipio was called) would use a call and response model of communication, regularly asking the group, "Are you with me now?" and "Are you running with me?" Elizabeth would work from a CRT perspective, providing the White students with illustrations of how that differed from an Africentric perspective. This was a striking counterbalance to the idea that there was a unified Black or African American perspective on adult education.

Elizabeth and I then delivered an article, "Race and Racism: A Critical Dialogue" (Peterson & Brookfield, 2007), at an Adult Education Research Conference. We modeled a candid exchange about race in which we wove some very specific examples of how race played out in our interpersonal relations. One example was an incident involving the *Harvard Educational Review* (HER). In 2002, while a Visiting Professor at Harvard University, I was asked to contribute an article to the

HER. I suggested, to the editorial board, a journal issue that would take the form of a symposium on racializing the discourse of adult education. I wanted to invite Dr. C, Elizabeth Peterson, Ian Baptiste, Juanita Johnson-Bailey, and Vanessa Sheared to contribute articles along with me on this theme.

The HER editorial board agreed, and we all began to write our separate pieces. A few months later, when the editorial board changed, the new board told us the symposium would now take the form of a main article written by me with commentaries on my piece submitted by my colleagues. So now, we were faced with Stephen Brookfield's piece being the central academic sun around which the contributions from the scholars of color would revolve. Not surprisingly, my colleagues all dropped out from the project. As Elizabeth said, "I can remember feeling like I'd been slapped in the face when it was suggested that your article would be featured and we, as African American scholars, would be invited to respond to it" (Peterson & Brookfield, 2007, p. 5). I published my own article reasoning, at a minimum, it would be good to have a piece on racializing the discourse of adult education in the HER. I still do not know whether that was the right thing to do.

### Conclusion

In terms of the five questions raised earlier in this article, I have argued racism is learned through family, media, school, and friendships as the ideology of White supremacy seeps into our consciousness. Even Whites like me, who like to think of themselves as anti-racist, frequently commit micro-aggressions that remain unacknowledged until a colleague brings them to our attention. Disruptive classroom events can heighten our awareness of these and can be challenged through narrative disclosure, particularly in team teaching.

While it is undoubtedly important to teach tips and techniques to combat racism, it is just as important for White adult educators to insert their own narratives into our pedagogy. Not only is the use of narrative inherently engaging as a pedagogic approach, but it also illustrates the complicated nature of anti-racist practice. In my case, people look at me as if I know something valuable about teaching in anti-racist ways. After all, the University of St. Thomas gave me the *Diversity Leadership Teaching and Research Award* in 2008 because of the workshops on teaching about race

I run at the university. Yet, between declaring a readiness to work in anti-racist ways and actually being able to do this lies an ocean of experiential contradictions. By sharing my regular commission of racial and gender micro-aggressions and talking about my racist impulses and instincts, I hope to teach doing this work is incredibly complex. I hope to communicate to White colleagues the deep-seated nature of learned racism and the message, as soon as you think you are making progress in combating this, you will say or do something that will reveal how racist ideology has its hooks into you. So, a crucial element of White adult educators' pedagogy about race is to teach our own racism.

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