

# Critical Thinking and Learning in Adults: A Case Study in Transformative Learning on White Supremacy and White Racial Identity

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## Abstract

This chapter outlines the process of critical thinking, situates it within the critical theory tradition, and explores its connections to the theoretical frame of transformative learning that currently dominates the field of adult education. As a case study, it then explores how the process of adult critical thinking can be developed around the analysis of the ideology of white supremacy and whites' refusal to acknowledge their white racial identity. I will use myself as an example of how a white person constantly struggles to negotiate the move to an anti-racist identity, and the chapter concludes with some remarks on how teachers can adopt narrative to further this process.

## Keywords

critical thinking – racial identity – transformative learning – white supremacy – case study

## 1 Introduction

Critical thinking occupies a special place in the hearts of adult educators, particularly because of its connections to the democratic tradition that informs the field. At the heart of a strong, participatory democracy is citizens' capacity to question the actions, justifications and decisions of political leaders, and the capacity to imagine alternatives to current structures and moralities that are fairer and more compassionate. Such capacities develop as we learn to think critically so encouraging critical thinking in adults is integral to the democratic project.

An interpretation of participatory democracy grounded in critical theory (Brookfield, 2004) also emphasizes the importance of citizens thinking critically about the dominant ideologies that keep a fundamentally unequal system intact. One of these is the ideology of white supremacy which holds that whites' supposedly superior intelligence, objectivity, reasoning power and command of logic means that they automatically occupy in positions of power and authority (Brookfield, 2019). White supremacy as an idea portrays people of color as too emotional, uneducated, unintelligent and animalistic to be entrusted with power. Although white supremacy as an ideology is often unarticulated, it underscores the functioning of the institutions of civil society and the state. Education, health care, housing, the penal system and government, are overwhelmingly structured to favor whites and to keep people of color on the margins. The idea of white supremacy informs the ways cities are designed, schools are funded, medical services are provided and transport routes designated. Environmentally, the siting of power stations or waste processing plants disproportionately in communities of color and poverty is an illustration of white supremacy just as much as using a racist epithet or suppressing voter turnout.

In this chapter I will outline the process of critical thinking, situate it within the critical theory tradition and explore its connections to the theoretical frame of transformative learning that currently dominates the field of adult education. I will then explore how the process of adult critical thinking can be developed around the analysis of the ideology of white supremacy and whites' refusal to acknowledge their white racial identity. I will use myself as an example of how a white person constantly struggles to negotiate the move to an anti-racist identity and conclude with some remarks on how teachers can adopt narrative to further this process.

## 2 The Process of Critical Thinking

The process of critical thinking usually begins with an event that points out a discrepancy between assumptions and perspectives that explain the world satisfactorily and what happens in real life. Because of this event, adults identify the assumptions that have been accepted unquestioningly up to that and starts to scrutinize these assumptions for their accuracy and validity. During this process of scrutiny, alternative perspectives on thought or action that are embedded in alternative assumptions start to suggest themselves. The final phase of the cycle, (which keeps on repeating itself as we go through more experiences characterized by depth, breadth, and intensity), is the taking of informed action. Informed action is action that is grounded in an accurate

assessment of the context in which the action is placed, so that the anticipated consequences of the action are as close as possible to those that actually occur. 'Action' as understood here includes cognitive action as well as behavioral. For example, the result of critical thinking about the prospects for successful social change might be the decision to hold off from becoming involved in a change initiative until more resources have been assembled and more alliances built.

The core process of critical thinking is assumption hunting; that is, recognizing and researching the assumptions that undergird our thoughts and actions (Brookfield, 2012). Assumptions are the taken for granted beliefs about the world, and our place within it, that seem so obvious to us as not to need to be stated explicitly. Assumptions give meaning and purpose to who we are and what we do. In many ways we *are* our assumptions. So much of what we think, say and do is based on assumptions about how the world should work, and what counts as appropriate, moral action within it. Yet frequently these assumptions are not recognized for the provisional understandings that they really are. Ideas and actions that we regard as common sense conventional wisdoms are often based on uncritically accepted assumptions. Some person, institution, or authority source that we either trust or fear has told us that this is the way things are and we accept their judgment unquestioningly. When we think critically we start to research these assumptions for the evidence and experiences that inform them.

Assumptions embedded in dominant ideologies such as white supremacy, patriarchy or capitalism are the hardest to uncover. They are paradigmatic assumptions in that they frame the whole way we interpret the events in our lives. When assumptions and the practices that follow from them are pointed out to us we often respond by saying they are not assumptions but empirical reality. If we start to question these foundational ideological assumptions this has substantial implications for us, calling into questions the rules of conduct by which we have lived our lives. Not surprisingly, then, people often resist examining these assumptions critically. This is particularly the case with the ideology of white supremacy.

### 3 Critical Thinking in the Critical Theory Tradition: Two Special Kinds of Assumptions

As a body of work, critical theory investigates how people learn to accept as normal and unremarkable the fact that they live their lives in fundamentally unequal systems, structures and institutions that privilege elites (Brookfield, 2004). Critical theory posits that this occurs because people learn dominant ideologies that structure how they view the world. Ideologies like capitalism,

white supremacy, and patriarchy become so deeply internalized that they constitute normality. Interrupting them requires a disorienting dilemma and the sustained critical thinking that follows from that event.

Critical thinking within a critical theory tradition tends to focus on the scrutiny of two interrelated sets of assumptions. First, there are those assumptions that frame how we view power relationships in our lives. Critical thinking entails exploring how the flow of power is a permanent presence. In our personal relationships, work activities and political involvements, power relations are omnipresent, though often submerged. Uncovering and questioning these power relations so that we might redirect the flow of power in a circular or democratic manner is the chief project of critical-theory-influenced critical thinking. Where race is concerned this involves uncovering the ways that access to good education, decent health care and political power are framed to favor whites. It also entails uncovering the microaggressions (Sue, 2010) that happen in everyday interactions such as personal conversations, meetings and classrooms.

The second kind of assumptions explored by critical thinking in the critical theory tradition are hegemonic assumptions. Drawing on Gramsci (1995) the term “hegemony” describes the process whereby ideas, structures, and actions come to be seen by the majority of people as wholly natural, pre-ordained, and working for their own good, when in fact they are constructed and transmitted by powerful minority interests to protect the status quo that serves these interests so well. Hegemonic assumptions are assumptions that we embrace eagerly because we think they are in our own best interests. Yet, perversely, these assumptions are actually working against us in the long term and serving the purposes of those who do not have our best interests at heart.

Dominant ideologies are inherently hegemonic and contain a repository of assumptions that keep an unequal and unfair system intact from being seriously challenged. Where white supremacy is concerned some of these currently operative assumptions in the United States and elsewhere are that (a) we live in a post-racial world, (b) institutions are color blind, (c) affirmative action unfairly disenfranchises whites, (d) black and brown people are invading in droves to destroy Euro-American values, and (e) the disproportionate number of people of color who are incarcerated demonstrates the inherently uncontrollable, violent nature of black and brown people.

#### 4 Critical Thinking as Transformative Adult Learning

In adult education one scholarly project has remained constant in the field: namely, to generate a distinctive theory of adult learning. The most sustained

effort in this regard has been Jack Mezirow's work in perspective transformation (1978), critical theory (1981) and transformative learning (1991). In the 1970's Mezirow had been witnessing what happened to his wife as she went to college as an adult student and this prompted his work into what he initially termed perspective transformation (Mezirow, 1978). His groundbreaking article outlining a critical theory of adult education and learning (Mezirow, 1981) placed adults' development of criticality at the center of this theory and situated it as a process of negotiating the transformative events informing adults' lives. As his work developed he renamed its focus as transformative learning.

Put very simplistically, Mezirow argued that as people negotiate adulthood in fragmented post-industrial societies they are confronted with a series of disorienting dilemmas. These dilemmas are present in situations where assumptions and expectations are overturned by a, usually traumatic, series of events. As a result of these disorienting dilemmas adults are forced to question and re-evaluate the ways they have understood the world. As they think critically about the utility of their assumptions and perspectives they develop meaning schemes (sets of assumptions related to specific situations), and meaning perspectives (assumptions constituting broad worldviews) to make sense of what we are experiencing. Over time these become increasingly comprehensive (in that they account for a broader range of events), and discriminating (in that they discern differences between different categories of events and phenomena). Adults transform their frames of reference through thinking critically about the assumptions of others (objective reframing), and their own assumptions (subjective reframing).

A central element of Mezirow's theory is what he calls "systemic" critical reflection that focuses on probing sociocultural distortions. Systemic reflection describes the process by which people learn to recognize how uncritically accepted and unjust dominant ideologies are embedded in everyday situations and practices. This kind of thinking focuses on helping people come to an awareness of how ideologies like capitalism shape belief systems and assumptions that justify and maintain economic and political inequity. To Mezirow (1998) systemic reflection uncovers our own "economic, ecological, educational, linguistic, political, religious, bureaucratic, or other taken-for-granted cultural systems" (p. 193).

Because systemic reflection involves thinking critically about dominant ideologies, the empirical work of transformative learning (King, 2009; Taylor & Cranton, 2012) is helpful to how we understand the way adults learn to think critically about white supremacy and white racial identity. For whites, becoming aware of how white supremacy has inscribed itself on their consciousness

is an example of highly complex systemic reflection. If your self-image is one of a non-racist person who has remained free of racist conditioning the prospect of acknowledging how white supremacy lives within you is daunting, even unimaginable. It requires of fundamental restructuring of meaning schemes and perspectives or, in the lexicon of critical thinking, an uncovering and challenging of deeply embedded paradigmatic assumptions.

Similarly, whites becoming aware that they have a racial identity is a transformative event that entails a huge cognitive and emotional move. From thinking you move through life treating everyone in a fair minded and compassionate way, whites now have to contemplate some deeply distasteful possibilities. For example, you have to ask yourself a series of very disturbing questions; how has your way been smoothed for you simply because of your whiteness? How have you benefitted from a system designed to keep people of color marginalized? Have these benefits sometimes been because of your own willing collusion? What racial micro-aggressions have you committed along the way? Most fundamentally, perhaps, you have to make the change from thinking “I am not racist” to “I am racist.” There cannot be a much more dramatic transformative shift for adults who think of themselves as good, anti-racist whites to make.

## 5 Critical Thinking and the Awareness of White Racial Identity

If critical thinking is indeed a uniquely adult learning process, then thinking critically about whiteness seems to be a particularly important project for our current era. Because criticality focuses on uncovering assumptions about the legitimate use of power and questions the way power moves around society, analyzing how white supremacy remains unacknowledged by many whites becomes a central focus of inquiry. A necessary first step in the process of helping whites think critically about race is to get them to consider the nature of their whiteness.

Whiteness buttresses power in a taken for granted, unnoticed way. As George Yancy (2018) writes, this is because racism is *not* the process of individually demeaning or diminishing others, “a site of individual acts of meanness” (p. 74); rather, it is being “implicated in a complex web of racist power relationships ... heteronomous webs of white practices to which you, as a white, are linked both as a beneficiary and as co-contributor to such practices” (p. 75). Since my whiteness constantly benefits me, and since that benefit accrues to me because I am defined in relation to the stigma of blackness, I am racist. I do

not go about hurling racial epithets but I am “embedded in a pre-existing social matrix of white power” (Yancy, 2018, p. 76) that gives me advantages of which I have only an occasional awareness. To feel safe is my norm, to be “systemically *racially* marked for death” (Yancy, 2018, p. 102) is Yancy’s.

I have been struck over the years by the fact that people of color tell me that the most helpful thing whites can do in terms of fighting racism is to become aware of what it means to be white. They say it is much more important for whites to learn that they have a particular racial identity, and to examine how that identity operates in the world, than it is for them to learn about the cultures of racial minorities. When I act on that advice and explore the elements of white identity I typically face accusations of reverse racism, of unfairly singling out whites for their supposed sins. This is, of course, very predictable given the analysis of white fragility (DiAngelo, 2018) and the worldview of those who have always thought of themselves as good whites (Sullivan, 2014).

In trying to engage the fact of whiteness and the reality of a white racial identity I am of course, engaged in a contradiction. If one of the most cited indicators of white identity is being unable to see that whiteness constitutes a racial marker (Sullivan, 2006; Tochluk, 2010), then how can a white person possibly become aware of his or her own racial being and think she or he can teach other whites about it? Don’t we need scholars of color such as Yancy (2004, 2012) to write from a different racial perspective that throws whiteness into sharp relief?

I argue that it is a question of both-and. When elements of whiteness are highlighted by people of color I learn how white supremacy operates to circumscribe and devalue their lives. I learn more about what it means to live in a world where whiteness is the norm around which institutions are organized. On the other hand, when whites examine whiteness together they learn how these norms are transmitted among themselves, how challenges to these norms are deflected, and how groupthink operates to stop efforts to identify what whiteness means. I would still be living in a totally unracialized way had it not been for other people pointing out the meaning of my white identity to me.

## 6 Abandoning the Good White Person Identity

I am a white man who for most of his life has prided myself on my compassion and empathy. In particular, I have always felt that I did not see race, preferring instead to believe that I saw character and behavior rather than skin color or phenotype. ‘Judge people by their actions’ has always been a credo of mine. I have told myself repeatedly that, sure I have made racial, ethnic, sexist and

homophobic jokes, but that is all they were – jokes. I certainly would never act in any overtly racist way. In thinking of myself as a ‘good white person’ (Sullivan, 2014) I practiced a form of aversive racism (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2005) professing to be anti-racist and condemning racist actions, while being complicit in a system that sanctioned those actions. For decades I engaged in small, covert acts of exclusion and diminishment with no overt racist intent that Sue (2010) describes as microaggressions.

In the last three decades thinking critically about race has fundamentally and irrevocably altered both my understanding of racism and my own participation in it. From believing that somehow I had abstracted myself out of any racist conditioning and thereby managed to escape the ideology of white supremacy I now realize that racist instincts, inclinations and intuitions live within me and constantly influence how I think and act. To move from a sense of myself as a good white person who has evaded racist conditioning to seeing myself as acting in ways determined by the elements of white supremacy I find within myself has indeed been transformative. It has forever fundamentally changed the way I engage in the world, both in all white contexts and multiracial settings.

This critical reappraisal has happened in several ways. First, through conversations with friends and colleagues of different racial identities I have learned that race is a complex yet all pervasive phenomenon. My paradigmatic assumption that I could monitor my own racism with clarity and full self-awareness has been fundamentally challenged. Second, talking to friends and colleagues and studying texts and videos has led me to question my assumption that I could easily recognize when racial micro-aggressions are in play. Third, through participating in formal workshops I have learned to experiment with alternative ways of combatting racist ideology and actions. Fourth, I have learned to apply the insights gained from my conversations, study and participation in workshops to the examination of my own personal conduct and experience. This means that I have learned to acknowledge that I will never completely lose the elements of White supremacist ideology lodged into my consciousness.

## 7 Three Specific Cognitive and Political Moves

Three specific cognitive and political moves I have experienced are common to critical thinking pedagogy around race. The first is to name and challenge the notion of color blindness that seems to many whites to represent a firm anti-racist stance. The second is to overturn the idea that whiteness does not constitute a racial identity and that only people of color are raced. The third is



to help whites understand that moving in and out of an engagement with race is an unacknowledged yet defining marker of a white racial identity.

### 7.1 *Color Blindness*

A recent anthology on teaching race (Brookfield, 2018) identifies the enduring permanence of the color blind perspective among whites. A color blind view of the world appeals to many whites for its seeming emphasis on the universal aspect of humanity shared by all people. It is a conscious adoption of Dr. Martin Luther King's dictum that we should judge people not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. Whites are often very supportive of this view, professing that they take people as they come, give everyone the benefit of the doubt, and then make individual judgments about people that are unaffected by race as they interact with them in particular settings.

Why should color blindness be a problem? Isn't it an anti-racist orientation to say you avoid stereotypes and put biases aside so you can focus instead on the unique humanity of each individual you encounter in your life? Well, if this were truly what was happening then I would be overjoyed. But the color blind perspective has two major flaws. First, it implies that whites can indeed put biases completely aside and see people in an un-raced way. This contradicts everything that transformative learning and critical thinking research reveals. In fact, overcoming implicit biases is a long and complex incremental process (Brownstein & Saul, 2016). Second, it assumes a level playing field is in place in which whites interact with people of color as moral and political equals.

The ideology of white supremacy is so all enveloping that only hermits permanently cut off from all human interaction and all media could escape its influence. So, despite whites saying that they see only people, not color, this is rarely the case (Yanow, 2018). To take myself as an example, I have been socialized in a world in which white supremacy underscores how I think institutions should function. Even though I have spent decades trying to uncover this ideology in myself and to identify racism in the contexts through which I move, I will always be held hostage to my white supremacist conditioning. There is a tightening of my body if I am the only white in an elevator full of people of color. My frustration with people who speak English as a second language quickly asserts itself if they are in a service role. I automatically click the lock of my car doors if driving through a 'bad' part of town. I have a quick internal debate on whether or to cross the road if a group of young black men comes towards me. I invariably grant extensions to students of color because I assume they will automatically need more time to conduct scholarly work. These are just a few of the ways that a white supremacist consciousness lives within me.

Even if I could remove all these biases, stereotypes and prejudices from my mental frameworks I would still be moving through an asymmetrical racial world. There is clear racial segregation in housing and even in 'integrated' public schools in my own state of Minnesota a color line clearly exists. Across the country incarceration rates for black and brown people are astoundingly disproportionate and the last few years have highlighted regular shootings of black males by white police. Add to this the demonization of black and brown immigrants as disease ridden terrorists, rapists and hardened gang criminals, and it seems impossible for whites not to realize they live in a deeply racist world in which whites are disproportionately advantaged. But white supremacy's ideological tentacles are deeply ensnaring.

### 7.2 *Whiteness Is Not a Racial Identity*

When I ask white people about the moment when they first become aware of their white identity I am often met with bemusement. Equally, the questions 'what does it mean to be white?' or 'what role does your whiteness play in your life?' are viewed almost as nonsensical. This is because many whites do not believe they have a racial identity and that whether or not they are white has absolutely nothing to do with where they are in life, or how they conduct themselves.

The belief that whiteness does not constitute a racial identity is a building block of white normativity; the idea that the norms and standards by which we judge what is acceptable and normal in the world are colored white. And it is something that whites do not usually think about unless, like the white mothers of children of color who have to navigate norms of whiteness (Chandler, 2016), something in our experience requires us to do so. Under white normativity race is something exhibited only by those with skin not colored white. This is because white supremacy has ensured that whiteness has become viewed as the universal standard, the de-facto center, the common sense way the universe should look when it is working as normal (Tochluk, 2010). Under white supremacy leadership looks white, authority looks white, experts look white and what counts as legitimate knowledge is constructed by whites. The power of white supremacy is that this situation is not understood as being constructed to advantage a dominant racial group. Instead it is viewed as unremarkable, obviously correct, and just the way things are (Brookfield, 2019).

One of the consequences of thinking you do not have a racial identity is concluding that you do not really need to participate in conversations about race, unless you know you are going to be working with people from different racial backgrounds. If you spend your life in predominantly white environments

surrounded by people who look like you, then it is not surprising that you would think that race is something ‘out there,’ evident in neighborhoods you do not frequent, streets you do not walk on, and company you do not keep. This is why in so many predominantly white environments the ‘experts’ who come to run workshops and do training around diversity are people of color. Whites assume that the only people who can teach about race are people of color since they are the only ones with a racial identity! The fact that whiteness is itself a racial identity is never considered. This is probably also why diversity offices in organizations are typically headed by the only person of color in the senior leadership team in predominantly white settings. If race is something you see only people of color having, then it makes sense to have such a person in charge of diversity because they have the ‘race’ that they are going to teach whites (who do not have race) about.

### 7.3 *Opting in and out of Race: The Problem of Structural Racism*

Whites who do not believe themselves to be raced and who live mostly in white environments can in effect decide when to opt in or out of thinking about, or dealing with, race. This is a luxury denied people of color who have to navigate a white world for chunks of every day. But the problem of race is really a *white* problem. White racist structures, policies and practices continue to endure partly because whites do not see how those structures are maintained with the result that they disadvantage people of color. The race “problem” is obviously a problem of the systematic marginalization and diminishment of people of color, but it is just as much a problem of how good white people, who consider themselves to be moved by morality and compassion, do not see how white supremacy and their collusion in that ideology keeps racism in place.

Yancy (2018) shows how thinking that you can move in and out of dealing with race reflects the individualistic, Horatio Alger mythology so endemic to American culture. It is easy to push thinking about race to the corners of your world if you think that being racist is all a matter of individual choice. Unless you put structural racism at the center of your analysis you can view racism as a matter of personal conduct, of whether or not you have bad thoughts, say bad things, and treat people unfairly. Many of the diversity and inclusiveness trainings I have attended, and no doubt some I have conducted myself, have fallen into this trap. Attention focuses on catching the implicit biases, prejudices, and stereotypes you carry in your head that structure your interactions with people, or the microaggressions (Sue, 2010) you enact that, without you intending it, demean people of color. Such trainings are necessary, but without an awareness of structural racism their effect is limited. People could attend a diversity institute and come away with a determination to purge elements

of racism from their personal behavior but with not an awareness of how systemic racism is maintained.

## 8 Outlining the Pedagogy of Narrative Disclosure

### 8.1 *Counter-Storytelling*

So how can whites be encouraged to think critically about the white supremacist ideology inscribed within them, and how can they come to the awareness that being white is itself a racial identity? Critical race theorists (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Zamudio & Russell, 2010) have debated these questions at length and concluded that the most effective pedagogic methodology is that of counter-storytelling (Bell, 2010).

The appeal of narrative is powerful yet simple. Narrative draws the reader or listener in. As Denning (2013) shows, the disclosure of personal experience, particularly when told in the form of a story, has much greater effect in propelling people to consider alternative ways of thinking than the presentation of research data. People remember examples, metaphors, and analogies they hear in a personal story far more than they do a theoretical explanation or a study's empirical findings. A narratively based pedagogy of critical thinking begins with telling a dramatic story that recognizably connects to people's current reality, but that somehow raises alarm. That alarm triggers the need to look for solutions that bring in further analysis, research and evidence. *So instead of starting with a well-researched proposal for how to combat racism, teachers begin with a dramatic story that shows the cost of not doing this.* The subsequent reasons for action and the specific proposals advanced then have much greater resonance for those hearing them for the first time.

Whenever I aim to teach people to think critically about race, I always work from a methodological assumption that, before I can ask anyone else to explore how racism lives within them, I need to engage in a prolonged period of self-disclosure of how it lives within me. I need to tell the story of how the constituent elements of the ideology of White supremacy have influenced my own behavior for many years. For example, I might try to show how it took me so long to notice that whites are regarded as the 'natural' de facto gatekeepers in scholarly endeavors. Or I might question the idea whites can unproblematically declare themselves as allies to people of color in the fight against racism.

### 8.2 *Whites Are Natural Gatekeepers*

This first idea insidiously seeps its way into whites' 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.” It is more that the power of the white gatekeeper role is revealed in the moment of astonishment people feel when they discover a gatekeeper who is *not* white. The instinctive surprise we experience at such moment is the chief indicator of the power of this ideology.

To demonstrate the power of this ideology I will usually start by talking about those who, in a five-decade career, have been my bosses. At the time of writing these words there have only been two persons of color who have ever been in a position of direct authority over me, and that has been for a total of eight months. For the other 47 years and five months of my career every dean, department head, principal, president, and book editor I have worked with has been white like myself. So 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 have two very important sounding titles: “Distinguished University Professor” is one and “Endowed Chair” is the other. As someone at the top of the professorial hierarchy I now find myself in the role of mentor to junior faculty at the outset of their careers who are trying to get published. Several of these are colleagues of color and a good number of them are women. Since patriarchy and white supremacy are inscribed within me, I am in the position of the white male power broker trying to work as an ally while working in an overwhelmingly white field and still being in thrall to learned racist ideology.

I talk about how I try to deal with this contradiction. I say that I try not to set any agenda with my mentee, but that I always begin any mentoring conversations 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 under-performing. At the outset I try to acknowledge my own identity as a white, Euro-American, and how the rules of the game have been set up to help me. If a junior woman colleague of color wishes to play this game of publish or perish I am more than willing to help them do that. I do not try to pretend that I can in any way draw on my own struggles to get to my position as a way of understanding theirs.

Twice I have been approached by junior women colleagues of color who have asked for some mentoring with regard either to publishing or to teaching. At both times I relished engaging in what I imagined were authentic conversations with colleagues where my experience and accomplishments would allow me to provide some help. After spending some years working with these colleagues, we co-facilitated a workshop on ways to introduce race into classroom

conversations. During the workshop I tried to model some openness to critique by asking these two colleagues to talk publicly about the micro-aggressions they had seen me enact towards them. It turned out that both had been sent to me by their respective deans to be “fixed.” They were told that in order to get tenure they “needed to see Stephen Brookfield.” So the familiar supremacist and patriarchal narratives of the white male savior heroically and empathically fixing things for female colleagues of color was enacted once again – even as I thought an exchange of equals was in place.

### 8.3 *Colleagues of Color Can't Succeed without a “White” Ally*

I have to admit, whenever I hear white colleagues declare themselves allies of colleagues of color, I cringe. This is because the designation of ally is not ever ours to make. Yes, I would like to be considered an ally, but I understand that the naming of me in that way is not in my hands. However, when working with white students or colleagues I try to keep the cringe internal. Displaying it openly is a clear act of disdain in the way the European American Collaborative Challenging Whiteness (EACCW, 2010) identifies. Instead, I often begin any discussion of being an ally by declaring my core assumptions of this work. I declare that I assume that people of color won't trust me and that this should have no bearing on my readiness to work in anti-racist ways. Being regarded with suspicion has actually nothing to do with me personally, but everything to do with the way white supremacy conditions whites to avoid thinking of themselves as raced or privileged.

One of the things I try to talk a lot about is my own practice of interacting with colleagues and students of color. I talk about my own withholding behaviors, of not speaking for fear of seeming authoritarian or racist. The European American Collaborative Challenging Whiteness (2010) points out how Whites often stay silent in multiracial dialogues because they do not want to be seen as shutting people of color down or reproducing white dominance of conversations. I remember working early in the 1980's with a group containing a single African American woman. Whenever she spoke I would remain studiously silent, congratulating myself on my empathic support. In my head I was “bringing her into voice” into the conversation, without any awareness of what a condescending, patriarchal interpretation this was of my own behavior. One day this student pulled me aside and asked me why I never responded to her comments in classroom discussion. She was visibly upset with what she saw as my disinterest in her views. So my supposed act of an alliance was actually interpreted as a micro-aggressive dismissal of her, while simultaneously increasing her perception of the power I held over her.

Race and racism are such “big” topics that going straight to the level of structural analysis can leave people feeling alienated, even confused. But when white teachers or leaders begin with narrative disclosures of how they enact racism this concretizes the idea that racism is pervasive and embedded in the institutions and communities in which we live our daily lives. Furthermore, it models an openness to critique and self-reflection that can set the tone for hesitant group members to decide they will take the risk to engage with this difficult topic.

## 9 Conclusion

The ability to think critically constitutes an important element in attempts to develop a universal theory of adult learning. In North America the theoretical juggernaut that is transformative learning is at its core based on the process of critical thinking; that is, of reappraising assumptions that do not satisfactorily explain the changes we saw happening around us and exploring alternative ways of thinking and acting. Given that we live in a changing racial landscape I have used the case of white racial identity to explore the methodological, emotional and cognitive barriers that adults face in critical thinking projects. Finally, I have argued for a pedagogy of prompting critical thinking about racial identity that is grounded in the methodology of narrative disclosure and critical race theory’s advocacy of counter narratives.

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