**Chapter 4** *Helping People Become Aware of Their Whiteness*

In this chapter we outline the basic steps we’ve found helpful in getting people in overwhelmingly white environments to be aware of their whiteness. The typical setting we’re imagining is one where an organization, institution or community has experienced a traumatic incident or series of events in which racism is clearly evident. This could be anything from a slogan scrawled on a BIPOC student’s dorm room door, to an alumnus shooting at Black Lives Matter protesters, to the expression of pain, outrage and anger at the state sanctioned police murder of unarmed people of color. We have experienced all of these in our own institutions.

The aftermath of such events sees the organization concerned struggling to address race and racism seriously as a community, possibly for the first time in its existence. Through ten-point action plans and another initiatives, the institution hopes to move swiftly and purposefully in addressing the problem of racism. Typically, they would love to show the world how major transformative change happens overnight. But the nature of how transformative learning happens is much more incremental. People struggle to ease themselves into what is going to be a major perspective change, a whole new way of thinking about how the world works. Their willingness to change is based on seeing people they trust doing the work in front of them and showing that they are not out to induce shame, seek confessions, or denigrate those for whom thinking about race is a new project.

The logic of this kind learning means it has to be allocated the time it needs. Transformative learning around race and racism is built on trustful relationships, on believing that those inviting you into this work see you for who you really are, not for whom they assume you are or want you to be. And this trustfulness cannot be forced. It needs time to germinate and that time can’t be artificially foreshortened. People need to see you walk the talk and practice what you preach. And then, once a serious reappraisal of their racial assumptions begins, and people start to consider a 180-degree different version of the world, they need time to think, to process, to mull over what the dramatically altered picture of life they’re exploring means for them and their future actions.

So in this chapter you’ll see that we adopt a scaffolding approach that begins with a lot of modeling and then moves incrementally to get people more and more comfortable with scrutinizing their own assumptions and actions. In doing this we follow work on how people learn to think critically. But we need to point out that in other settings we might work in a far different, much more direct, way. We both subscribe to Myles Horton’s (1990) distinction between education and organizing. Working as educators we’re focused on the dynamics of how learning happens and how best to foster that. If learning requires extensive scaffolding, then that’s what we need to provide. Working as organizers, by way of contrast, involves trying to counter, usually from a marginalized position, the actions of organizations who don’t represent your interests. We have to react speedily and forcefully to decisions, policies and initiatives designed to blunt antiracism, and sometimes don’t have the luxury of time to set up a program of incremental learning.

What follows for the rest of this chapter is a typical sequence of steps that we take as we try to get people who haven’t done this before to engage with their whiteness, even as they deny that this work is necessary.

**Adjust Your Definition of Success**

Before we take an initial step into any room in which we’re working we need to do some important internal mental work. Both of us want to do good work and both of us believe passionately in what we’re doing. Some part of us would love to think of ourselves as the lone heroes and heroines of pedagogy depicted in movies like *Dead Poets Society*, *Dangerous Minds*, and *The Great Debaters*. The central characters in these teaching dramas are charismatic individuals who wring transformative changes in their students’ lives. We’re not immune to these portrayals. Also, the linear progress of increasing perfectionism that’s so much a part of white epistemology has its hold on us. Finally, the institutional evaluations and performance appraisals we’re subject to invariably measure our effectiveness by how much learning we’re prompting or how much people change.

Put all these elements together and it’s easy to go into an event designed to help people recognize their whiteness assuming that success will be represented by large numbers of people telling you how the racial blinders have been lifted from their eyes and how they now see whiteness and white supremacy in every corner of their lives. We’ve both privately yearned for ‘Kumbaya’ moments of racial healing when people put their arms around each other and sing ‘We Shall Overcome’. So before we meet with any group we have to give ourselves a stern talking to and tell ourselves “that ain’t gonna happen”. We keep in mind the fourth rule of courageous conversations (Singleton, 2012, 2014) – expect and accept a lack of closure. Anticipating any kind of resolution or consensus is naïve. Fox (2013) asks us to “remember we’re human. We don’t have to resolve all tension or come to complete understanding. The point is to talk. The process is everything” (p. 75). We agree.

What counts as success for us is leaving a session with some evidence that people are ready to continue a conversation. We expect a lot of confusion, push back and some expressions of outright hostility. We anticipate long, awkward, uncomfortable silences, periods of crying, some angry outbursts and to feel like unequipped novices a lot of the time. We tell ourselves that if we’re defining ‘going well’ by things adhering to the white epistemological norm of staying calm, keeping things on an even keel, and not letting things ‘get out of control’ through the expression of strong emotions, then we’re destined to fail. So we have both tried to reframe what we count as failure and success. We accept there will be periods of non-communication along the way as people need time to process the starkly different realities they hear from others in a group or from the facilitators. But if, at the end of a session, people are still open to talking further then for us the event has been an enormous success.

**Begin by Getting a Sense of How People Feel About the Event**

As we begin a workshop, class, institute or training session we’ll usually conduct an anonymous *sli.do* poll (previously *Poll Everywhere*) on how people feel as they come into the event. We’ll include a range of possible responses from ‘excited’ to ‘fearful’, ‘wary’ to ‘holding my judgment’. One quick formulation is as follows.

Question: *Which of the following feelings or emotions are you aware of as you get ready to talk about race?*

**Anxious** – I’m worried about saying the wrong thing, that I’ll be humiliated, or that things will get way too uncomfortable

**Excited** – I need to know more about this and look forward to some real talk today

**Resentful** – I object to being made to show up for this event. I don’t think it’s necessary because race is a made up issue pushed by left wing groups

**Determined** – I know today might be uncomfortable but this is too important an issue not to take seriously. So I’m going to stick with it.

**Confused** – I don’t really see why we’re doing this because I’m not aware of any glaring racism in our institution or community

People can check as many of these options as they wish and after they’re done (we usually allow about a minute) we pull the findings up on the screen in the room so everyone can see the spread of responses to the poll. This gives us a sense of where people are in their readiness for this conversation and allows us to honor the resistance, skepticism and hostility that exists. Perhaps more importantly, it gives us the chance to address the emotionality of the topic head on, and to let participants know that now we’re entering a brave space where people will feel strong emotions.

If a majority of participants check the ‘Resentful’ option, then it’s probably worth our while to dig deeper into the causes of that resentment. For that eventuality we have a second *sli.do* poll in reserve.

Question: *Which of the following options comes closest to your reasons for feeling like today is going to be a waste of your time?*

* Race is a non-issue anymore – we’ve had a black President
* This event is pushing a racial agenda
* This is a discussion for people of color, not for us
* Whatever I say I’m going to be called a racist - so there’s no point in me talking
* I’m sick of being blamed for things I had no control over like slavery
* I’m not a racist – I don’t see color
* Here we go again with the white bashing and white shaming

**Make Sure You do a Lot of Early Modeling**

We both subscribe to the mantra that before you ask anyone to do anything that involves risk or challenge you need to engage in that same activity yourself and to let people see you doing that. Michael’s (2013) words resonate for us: “When I facilitate, I plan for and model self-disclosure for every exercise that I lead. I think about the stories I want to tell ahead of time and practice telling them. I push myself to think of stories that are current so as to model my own ongoing personal struggle and the authentic vulnerability that comes from exposing our current flaws rather than focusing on things we have overcome or learned in the past (p. 107).” The two of us make sure that we begin an event by talking about what it means for us to be white, how we came to that awareness, and how we constantly forget its significance. Both of us have found that starting with a personal story gives a sense of connectedness and immediacy to any workshop, meeting or class we’re running.

We do acknowledge, however, that using narrative is sometimes an example of white privilege, and that whites can “tell these stories without being viewed as “angry” or being punished or penalized by engaging in these types of discussions” (Ellington, 2016, p. 215). When Stephen discloses a narrative of being race blind and of struggling to understand his own racism, he is rewarded for being ‘vulnerable’ or ‘brave’. He gains institutional likeability “simply by writing essays or books about racism, by teaching courses about racism at a university, by speaking at plush diversity conferences, or by doing cultural competence or diversity consulting” (Gorski, 2015, p. xiv). As a woman, Mary runs greater risks of having her narrative self-disclosure being seen as overly emotional or an instance of her losing control. But people of color who recount narratives of struggle and mistakes risk being seen as incompetent, overly subjective and not rigorous enough, “making any apology or admission of vulnerability an impossibility in terms of ongoing credibility” (Okun, 2010, p. 64).

**Show How You Value People’s Identities**

After disclosing some sort of personal story we then ask people to focus on the nature of identity. Sometimes we’ll use a variant of the *I am from* exercise that asks people to respond to various prompts such as *I am from* a place, community, spirituality, class, desire, race, sexuality or any other indicator you wish to use (Klein, 2018). Another approach is to ask people to tell the story of their names. A third option is to request that people bring in an object that has some significance in defining what’s important in their life. If we’re with a group for only a short period of time we’ll ask them each to speak the name of someone who is important to them and say why that is so.

The point of these exercises is to show people that a) who you think you are is important for how you think and act in the world and b) it’s fine to be proud of who you are. Although we both live in a racist world in which whites are systemically advantaged, we don’t want to send the message that everyone who is white is inevitably morally compromised or beyond redemption. We talk about the aspects of our white identity that we are proud of, usually our artistic passions or the communities we treasure. Both of us have a healthy skepticism of the automatic privileging of Eurocentric epistemology, but both us also value aspects of that. Although we advocate for holistic health, neither of us wants to be operated on by a surgeon who has not been rigorously trained in her craft or who does not have a detailed knowledge of anatomy. Both of us believe in evidence-based practice. We may sometimes query the procedures used to collect data and the way logic is seen as the province only of elite whites (Bonilla-Silva and Zuberi, 2018). We also often criticize the agendas of those conducting research, the agendas of funding agencies, or the way it’s reported and disseminated. But we both believe that the accurate collection of empirical data is crucial to informed decision-making.

This early emphasis on valuing people’s identity is intended to avoid people descending quickly into shame and guilt at their whiteness. We want to show that we are not self-loathing haters of anything white. The idea is to affirm that people should be proud of who they are and where they’ve come from. This is a necessary precursor to them (and us) starting to bring elements of racial identity into the mix.

**Address the Process to be Used**

Many resources in anti-racist training stress developing group norms or ground rules early on. Our experience is that the extensive time that can be spent doing this does not always have the beneficial effect one would anticipate. We don’t want to discourage you from asking participants how they would like to talk to each other, but if you do that you can expect some pretty standard responses. White groups in particular will emphasize being respectful and agreeing to disagree. We find that these suggestions often allow for the expression of classic avoidance behaviors that allow people to stop really coming to grips with race. Being respectful can mean “don’t upset me by suggesting I’m not a good person”. Agreeing to disagree can mean “let me stay with my experience and don’t ask me to take yours seriously”.

We prefer to introduce the notion of moving into brave spaces (Pawlowski, 2019) in which we’re aware that discomfort, intense emotions and deep feelings are bound to arise when we talk about something as raw as racism and white supremacy. If we do suggest ground rules we will keep them short and quick, so that groups can remember them easily. Singleton’s (2015) courageous conversations rules are easily remembered – stay focused, stay engaged, expect discomfort and accept a lack of closure. We have also used some of *Visions Inc’s* rules such as “OK to disagree, not OK to blame or attack” or “make ‘I’ statements only”. A rule we developed ourselves to use for short periods is the three-person rule; once you’ve spoken don’t speak again until at least three others have contributed.

**Provide Shared Video Information that Shows a Different View of the World**

After we’ve modeled our commitment to analyzing our own white identity and shown that we’re not out to bash anyone who’s white just because of their race, we then start to up the ante. The next step is to provide a view of the world that comes as a shock because it presents a picture of life as being determined *wholly* by one’s racial identity. We begin by asking a predominantly white audience to describe what the most important conversation is that they’ve ever had with their sons. With small groups this can be done verbally, with large groups using a tool such as *backchannelchat.com*. The responses typically cover a gamut of topics; how to deal with bullying, what it means to be a man, how sex works, the importance of treating women respectfully, what constitutes sporting success, how to deal with failure, and so on. It’s pretty rare for any mention of race or whiteness to come up.

Then we show the very brief op-ed documentary from the *New York Times* titled *A Conversation with My Black Son* (Ghandbir and Foster, 2015). Here African American parents describe the talk they all have to give to their sons about how to react when they’re stopped by the police. In a short five-minute burst a white audience is privy to a world in which the racial identity of blackness is seen as the determining factor in negotiating the external world. The video doesn’t engage in white bashing or focus particularly on white racism. It simply states that black boys in a white world will be stopped by the police solely because of their race. Consequently, responsible and caring parents need to prepare them to manage that eventuality.

Since the whites in the audience who are parents presumably think of themselves as being responsible and caring, this video appeals to a universal instinct of wanting to keep your children safe. We can then briefly comment on how we as white parents never had to prepare our own sons to deal with the police, because we assumed they would never be perceived as threatening or singled out for treatment solely because of their race. This allows us to introduce the concept of white privilege and the invisible knapsack of automatic advantages whites carry around with them (McIntosh, 1988, 1998), one of which is assuming that the police are there to protect you.

**Use Scenario Analysis**

Now it’s time to get the audience more involved. In the past we’d probably have moved to encouraging people to talk directly about their own experiences of race. These days, however, we typically insert an intermediary step of some kind of scenario analysis or brief case study. We’ll present a two or three paragraph fictional situation in which a central character is taking an action, making a decision or considering a choice. We ask people to put themselves into the shoes of the central character and to try and recreate what that person is thinking and the assumptions under which they’re operating.

The scenario we write is always centered around a racial incident. It might describe a landlord deciding which potential renters to interview based on the sound of applicants’ voices over the phone or by consulting their Facebook profiles. It could be a situation to do with hiring or college admissions. A more complex scenario we’ve used has been one in which a white facilitator establishes a ground rule in which declarations of perceived racism by people of color are always to be trusted by whites (Brookfield, 2013).

The exercise begins with people individually answering the following three questions about the scenario:

* What assumptions is the central character making as she or he acts this way, makes this decision, or considers this choice?
* How could the central character check whether or not these assumptions are valid?
* What’s a different perspective on the situation that the central character is not taking account of? This could be an interpretation of what’s happening that she or he has not considered and that might come as a surprise to him or her.

We then ask people to share their responses in groups. In this process people will often identify assumptions that come as a surprise to their peers, and propose widely varying explanations of what could be happening in the scenario. Because the scenario or case study focuses on a concrete situation it grounds what might be otherwise abstract discussions of race, identity and whiteness in terms of specific experiences. It’s important to stress at the outset that there is no right or correct answer to any of the questions. Saying this takes a lot of pressure off people’s shoulders. Because it is not the participant’s own reasoning at stake, and because all the attention is on the fictional character’s assumptions and interpretations, people are mentally freer to play with notions of race and whiteness than if we had begun with an example from their own lives.

**Structure Discussions Protocols**

Now it’s time to move to the examination of personal experience. This is the point at which we used to start before we had a better understanding of the preparatory steps needed to get people to this point. However, we recognize that even with extensive preparation, talking about what their own whiteness means is still a difficult step for many to take. People don’t want to say the wrong thing but don’t know what the right thing is. They may feel that because they have lived only in white environments that they have nothing to contribute to a discussion of racial identity (itself a prime marker of whiteness). This may be the first time they’ve ever talked seriously in a group about race so it’s important to help them into the process.

We’ve found that it’s useful to structure discussions by proposing specific protocols to guide how people talk to each other but *not* what they say. Our protocols typically focus on hearing from everyone before moving into deeper conversation. We want to encourage careful and attentive listening, and to stop people defining an agenda too early or co-opting a discussion with their own personal concerns. Some of the protocols emphasize the importance of silent processing as much as active speech. Chapter 7 describes a number of these protocols in great detail.

In contrast to our expectation that setting structured protocols might be experienced as artificially constraining or limiting, the feedback we’ve received overwhelmingly is that it’s welcomed. People appreciate knowing what’s expected of them and welcome the fact that the exercises we use are designed to ensure no-one is left out.

**Keep on Top of What’s Really Happening**

Facilitating any kind of racial dialogue is complex and whites talking about racial identity entails the additional difficulty that you’re trying to get people to see as extraordinary something that they have taken for granted. Whiteness is the sea within which people swim and becoming aware of how that whiteness is tied to power and to keeping people of color marginalized is a daunting prospect. In whiteness work the two of us believe that we make the road by walking (Horton and Freire, 1990). In other words, we’re constantly changing plans, making adjustments and introducing new directions based on what we’re learning about how the group is experiencing what’s happening to them. We may have a broad road map comprising the guidelines we outline in this chapter, but the terrain we’re traversing is constantly changing. Sometimes dramatic tectonic shifts happen as a group experiences a major crisis. At other times you discover your map is outdated by a technological innovation, a change in group membership, or an unexpected outside event.

Because each context we work in is different with its own particular history and dynamics, it’s important for us to try and keep on top of what’s happening so that we can make necessary adjustments along the way. Two tools are especially helpful in this regard. The first is the web tool backchannelchat.com. We open a backchannel chat feed for each session we run so that people can register anonymously any comments, reactions or criticisms they have as the session is proceeding. We commit to checking this feed every 15 minutes or so and address questions, comments and issues as they arise. Or, if we’re needing immediate information on how a session is going, we’ll pause and ask people to go to the day’s backchannel chat feed and let us know what has been most helpful or confusing so far. This tool is especially useful in a one-off event where we only have a group for a limited period of time.

When we’re meeting with the same group several times over a longer period we’ll use the critical incident questionnaire (CIQ), a tool Stephen devised in the early 1990’s that is available for free download from his website (<http://www.stephenbrookfield.com)>. This is a five item, one-page form that asks participants to note at what moments in a session they were most engaged and most distanced, what actions that anyone took that were most helpful or most confusing, and what surprised them most about the session. The responses are anonymous and the facilitator collects the forms, reads through them, and notes the main themes that arise.

The next time the group gets together the session starts off with leaders presenting the findings from the last week’s CIQ. They note differences in the group’s responses, identify problems that are emerging, and address concerns that are voiced. When appropriate they show that they’re making adjustments and changes based on the CIQ data. If people say on the forms that they want to avoid controversy and contention and avoid talking about race, leaders re-justify why it’s important to stay focused on that topic. Ever since we’ve used this tool neither of us has had a group that’s spiraled out of control or tried to sabotage our efforts without us knowing that this was happening early on. We both believe that forewarned is forearmed and knowing what’s developing early on in a group’s life allows us to respond better to emerging problems.

**I’m White but Don’t Call Me Privileged**

Before leaving this chapter we want to address one final issue. Many times in exploring whiteness we’ve heard a heartfelt critique from people who are struggling to survive economically that the notion of white privilege or the term white supremacy makes no sense at all to them. They tell us they’re from a working class family, are the first in their family to get a high school diploma, work three jobs to stay afloat, have had to fight to get to college, are deep in debt from loans, struggle to pay bills and arrange transport and childcare, and that nobody’s giving them a hand out or leg up.

The two of us were born in working class communities in Oshkosh, Wisconsin (Mary) and Bootle, Liverpool (Stephen) so we sympathize with this critique and with the way that foregrounding race sometimes ignores class analysis. At some point in becoming a white antiracist the notion of intersectionality – of how class, gender, sexual orientation and ability are connected – inevitably comes into play. But in the moment when notions of privilege are soundly rejected by whites struggling to make ends meet, how do we respond?

The first thing we do is to recognize the legitimacy of the critique. We don’t try and deflect the reality of people’s experiences. We honor the truth-telling people are doing and, when possible, talk about our own history of collecting the dole, being unemployed, and piecing together a wage out of multiple short term jobs.

Then we say that in the United States there are multiple ways people are excluded from their share of the American dream. If you live in an economically deprived rural or urban neighborhood without decent transport, schools, health care and no jobs, then you’re getting the shaft from a system that clearly privileges urban wealth and power. We then point out that being poor is the most crushing blow of all, and that racism and poverty are twin pillars of oppression in the United States.

But then we point out that one’s economic position is something that can potentially be changed, but that one’s racial identity can’t. For example, if there’s a sudden oil boom in North Dakota and people of all races get hired at equal rates, you can conclude that race is less of a factor in employment. But when new employees then try to find accommodation in local communities, people of color are likely to face restrictions that whites don’t. When whites go to spend their wages in stores they are not followed around by security in the way commonly experienced by people of color. When whites go out on the town to blow off steam, local police are going to look more benignly on a group of whites playing loud country music in a car and shouting at random passers-by, than they are when encountering a group of people of color blasting out hip hop. And if a car is stopped for erratic driving or any other infraction the racial identity of the driver plays a big part in determining how a white police officer reacts to them.

Then we end by reiterating the truth of the economic exploitation of whites and acknowledging that all forms of systemic exclusion need to be addressed. We say we don’t want to get into what is often called the ‘oppression Olympics’ where people compete to document the relative devastation experienced by racism, sexism, poverty, homophobia and so on. We finish by reminding people that for this particular event we’re focusing on racial identity, whilst acknowledging that multiple forms of oppression exist.

Our definition of white privilege is that it is the absence of the penalties incurred by those who, because of their skin color or phenotype, are judged to be “less than”. Essentially it is “an absence of the consequences of racism. An absence of structural discrimination, an absence of your race being viewed as a problem first and foremost, an absence of ‘less likely to succeed because of my race’” (Eddo-Lodge, 2017, p. 86). People of color have a set of assumptions and understandings surrounding them that presume criminality, violence, laziness and a lack of intelligence on their part that whites, even those who are economically destitute, are not as subject to.

One final point. As the *Midwest Critical Whiteness Collective* (Lensmire et.al., 2013) point out, discussions of privilege sometimes dive deeply into a confessional mode. As the whites in a group carefully enumerate the various manifestations of their privilege, it’s easy for them to confuse acknowledging their white identity and admitting to their collusion with racist systems as taking some form of anti-racist action. Whilst we believe that understanding all the unearned privileges we have is as good as any other way to start examining whiteness, we must be wary of equating owning up to one’s previously unacknowledged privilege with antiracist action. An antiracist white identity has to be an activist one. Although intrapersonal reflection is a kind of cognitive action, we see the living out of an antiracist impulse as the attempt to dismantle racist structures, systems, policies and practices.

We wish we could claim that our way of dealing with protestations regarding the existence of privilege always works, but have to acknowledge that it often doesn’t. But then, as pointed out early in this chapter, we tell ourselves not to equate something working with people seeing the light in the way we want them to. We admonish ourselves to remember that success is simply keeping the conversation going. That way, if we’re still talking about race and racial identity - even if people are objecting to our analysis and saying passionately how we’ve got it wrong - then we feel we’re being successful.