**Chapter 8** *Getting People to Think Structurally about Race*

How does racism endure? How does the insane notion that whole groups of people are less than fully human because of a different phenotype or level of melanin in their skin come to be accepted as conventional wisdom, as common sense? Genetically there is far more that unites than divides us and the DNA of white Europeans and black Africans differs in no significantly discernible way. So what causes large swathes of the white population to ascribe innately lower levels of intelligence and personality traits such as a propensity for violent criminality to black and brown people? And what stops communities of color from rising up in revolution?

The short answer is the paramilitary power of the state. Police departments around the country have become militarized in terms of their vehicles and armaments. White police officers can cite that they fear for their life as a justifiable reason for shooting dead any black person who they feel in some way is acting erratically. After all, under white supremacy, erratic behavior by people of color is viewed as one small step away from the volatility and violence ascribed to black bodies.

The long answer to why this acceptable remains unchanged lies embedded in the tradition of critical theory (Brookfield, 2004) which ascribes the mass acceptance of enduring inequality to ideological manipulation. Put simply, if you can get people to see the world in a certain way then they will keep themselves in line. You won’t need to bring military force onto the streets to control people’s behavior or ensure that an insane system stays in place because they will do that themselves. If most people think that whites and men should be in control of making the major decisions on how resources should be allocated, because whiteness and masculinity are equated with calm reasoning and the use of logic and objectivity unsullied by emotion or passion, then, as Rebecca Traister (2018) observes, white patriarchy runs the show.

**The Ideology of Individualism**

Individualism as a dominant ideology in the United States comprises a set of beliefs and practices that help deflect challenges to a blatantly unequal system. It comprises two core beliefs. The first is that everyone exists on a roughly level playing field and that anyone can make what they want of their life by dint of their own perseverance and hard work. When parents tell their children that they can be anything they want to be this seems an optimistic and motivational message. It inspires children to visualize alternative futures and inspires their dreams. Anyone can lift themselves up by their boot straps and soar out into the world as a confident leader or dynamic entrepreneur. Capitalism as an idea is founded on the idea that free enterprise allows any individual who is smart, hardworking and dynamic to become economically successful.

The second core belief is that we are in control of our individual destinies, captains of each of our souls. What we make of our lives is deemed to be a result of the personal decisions we take at the significant turning points we all experience in life. The feelings, instincts, and intuitions that govern our actions are believed to be unique to us alone. Together they constitute our particular identity, the one that maneuvers through the terrain of an individual life. At some deep level we see ourselves as disconnected from the settings, locations and people that surround us and engaged in taking on the sole responsibility for creating our life.

This individualist emphasis is an enduring, deeply rooted and extremely powerful element of the American psyche, particularly for whites. It’s bound up with notions of personal expression, the flag, freedom of speech, and Lady Liberty waving in generations of hopeful immigrants and giving them the chance to make better lives for themselves. Archetypal figures such as the cowboy, the frontier settler, even the venture capitalist embody the notion that anyone can be President or the CEO of a global corporation.

Of course this is a *white* lie in that life chances are irrevocably tied to racial identity. So if you are white then it’s very well documented that the chances that you will be able to aspire to and create wealth are higher (Lipsitz, 2018). The myth of individualism uses black exceptionalism – the political successes of individuals of color from President Obama, Condi Rice and Colin Powell, millionaire sports figures such as Michael Jordan or Kobe Bryant and mogul media entertainers like Sean Combs, Kanye West, and Beyonce – to prove its truth. “Look at all these successful black politicians, media moguls and billionaire sports stars – they prove that anyone can be wildly successful irrespective of their race!”

**Individualism and Racism**

But perhaps the most pernicious effect of the ideology of individualism is to present racism as

as a matter of personal choice. If each of us is really in charge of charting our own course, planning and realizing our own destiny, then individually we can decide whether or not to be racist. Racism thus becomes a wholly personal choice, something that white people decide to opt into, or reject, on a day by day basis. When racism is perceived as a series of individual judgments and actions – today I was racist but yesterday I was not – then combatting racism becomes seen as a matter of personal fortitude. Whites can resolve to be on high alert for their own enactment of racial micro aggressions, can vow to monitor their implicit biases, and strive to cut out racist jokes, tropes and stereotypes. Viewed this way, whites can convince themselves that real progress is being made, one person at a time.

We don’t want to dismiss these individual kinds of efforts as naïve. The two of us take them very seriously and try to work on ourselves in the ways just described. But we’re also aware that seeing anti-racism as a personal choice obscures the systemic nature of the phenomenon. In reality, individual acts of racism are the personal enactments of structural reality. White supremacy as an ideology ensures the continuing dominance of one racial group by portraying its exercise of control as an uncontestable empirical truth. Individualism as an ideology obscures that fact by perpetrating the idea that where one ends up in life is all down to personal fortitude, grit, or luck.

In this perspective the fact that whites end up in positions of power and authority is not the result of systemic oppression, but just the way things shake out. It’s seen as almost a matter of chance that those who constantly reap the material benefits of capitalism are mostly white. Individualist ideology means that the continuing disenfranchisement and marginalization of people of color is not understood as linked to school district funding mechanisms, the specific design of intelligence tests, or redlining housing policies. The disproportionate levels of infant mortality or poor health care amongst communities of color is disconnected from the fact that members of poor communities (which are composed disproportionately of people of color) piece together employment from multiple part-time jobs, none of which carry health benefits.

Doing antiracist work on your own learned biases and stereotypes without paying attention to the way that the power of rich white elites remains undisturbed ultimately plays into the hands of white supremacy. As Crass (2015) observes, “we can’t think our way out of the problem of white privilege by being really aware white people” (p. 16). Focusing exclusively on individual consciousness raising poses no real danger to white supremacy. In particular, middle class whites (like the two of us have become) can convince themselves that personal reflection and introspection is the important thing we can do – “start with yourself!” At some level, of course, this is true. Looking at your own history and socialization can be a significant entry point to activist engagement. And publicly modeling your own disclosure of how you have peeled back the layers to realize what racist instincts you’ve internalized is a crucial first step as you start to encourage other whites to explore how to become antiracist.

But if all that happens is that you feel you have a better understanding of yourself, then racism endures. True activism happens when all people of different racial identities realize their common interest in organizing and fighting for the basic necessities of a fulfilled life; stable employment, a safe community, decent wages, access to affordable health care, clean water and education for all. The greatest threat to white supremacy is when people start to perceive that their lot in life is not the result of individual accidents or the vicissitudes of fate and that they all want the same things. Once people realize that then they start to build alliances across racial groups, develop mass social movements, and create political parties that truly represent the desires of so-called ‘ordinary’ people. Understanding that stoking racial divisions amongst poor whites and BIPOC folks is a tactic to prevent a mass movement for economic and environmental justice from developing, means that people will start to combine in a common project to get their piece of the American pie. That puts white supremacy is on the defensive.

It’s also true that when people start to see racism as structural and systemic, when they understand that biases, micro aggressions and racist stereotypes are *learned* rather than as originating in individual psyches, there is less embarrassment to owning up to them. Thinking structurally should be the theoretical north star that guides activism, the framework that “consistently explains patterns of injustice” (Love, 2020, p. 132) and gives us “language to fight, knowledge to stand on, and a humbling reality of what intersectional justice is up against” (Love, 2020, p. 132). The logical outcome of structural thinking is that instead of whites blaming people of color for taking jobs, using affirmative action to take college places, and becoming welfare kings and queens, both whites and BIPOC folks realize that the common enemy is the white supremacist economic structure.

When whites understand that a white supremacist view of the world is embedded in institutions and systems, when learning racism is seen as a normal part of enculturation and socialization, then it becomes easier for people to talk about how it’s manifested in their own lives. In their analysis of the roots of implicit bias, Daumeyer, Rucker and Richeson (2017) argue that, “a model of implicit bias that situates its expression on situational factors, then, should be more acceptable to individuals” (p. 258). We have both observed this to be true. Seeing bias and advantage as structurally created helps decrease the white fatigue that Flynn (2015) describes whereby whites, even if they are committed to antiracism, feel personal responsibility, guilt and shame when race takes center stage in classes, workshops or meetings.

If racism is understood as a structural phenomenon, the focus is placed on *systems* of exclusion and acculturation. This is why the two of us often say that to grow up in a racist world and *not* to have learned racist conditioning would be very strange. We try to normalize racism by presenting it not as a shameful personal moral defect but as a natural outcome of living every day in racist systems and structures.

An antiracist identity must focus on understanding racism as structural and systemic, and on a commitment to taking collective action to change those structures and systems. Working on your own racist habits, inclinations and biases is important and necessary, but it’s only the beginning of the journey to become a white antiracist. We must move from the individual to the systemic, from the personal to the collective. We must help build movements, commit to institutional and community initiatives that address inequity, and focus on changing policies and political parties. People come and go but structures and systems endure unless some collective effort disrupts them. In short, we need to think structurally, not individually.

**Locating Structural Inequity in Groups: The Privilege Walk**

People embedded in individualist ideology and unused to thinking structurally will usually not react well to beginning with a critical theory analysis. In contrast, engaging them in an experiential activity that confronts them with how uncomfortable structural realities are part and parcel of their daily lives and personal experiences will likely be more successful. One such activity is the *privilege walk*. Based on McIntosh’s (1988) initial idea of whiteness as a knapsack of privileges, this exercise demonstrates physically the structural inequities based on race, class and gender that exist in a group.

The process begins with everybody standing in a straight line across a large room. In response to a series of prompts people take a step forward or backward (or stay in place) depending on their responses.

Typical prompts are:

*If you studied the culture of your ancestors in school, take one step forward.*

*If one of your parents was fired from their job, take one step back.*

*If your parents owned the house you grew up in, take one step forward.*

*If you believe the police are there to help you when you’re having difficulty, take one step forward.*

*If you’ve ever been the subject of racial abuse directed at you, take one step back.*

*If you rely on public transportation to get around, take one step back.*

As people move backwards or forwards in response to these prompts, a geography of the classroom quickly emerges in which people of color, women and LGBTQI folks are mostly situated towards the back. This demonstrates how racial and other identities touch participants’ lives in a real time training, class session or meeting. It’s a very effective way to illustrate a big abstract idea like structural inequity. The exercise shows how what seem like the idiosyncratic events of people’s personal lives are actually determined by an inbuilt structural advantage enjoyed by whites.

As a group observes its white members, and particularly its white men, moving forward or standing in place as others move towards the back of the room, leaders and trainers can use that stark physical reality to begin a consideration of structural racism. The fact of structural inequality is, quite literally, embodied in the space where people are gathered. You can then follow up by introducing research that underscores how access to wealth, health care, higher paying jobs and education matches the pattern of how participants were located in the room (Roediger and Esch, 2012; Flynn, Holmberg, Warren and Wong, 2017; Saito, 2020; Wilkerson, 2020).

**Beginning with Story: The Brain Fart**

We like to start work on thinking structurally with some kind of narrative or story that people can personally relate to and then work backwards from this particular event to help them see how specific actions are structurally framed.

The following is an example of a story that Stephen uses to lead participants into structural thinking.

*I was running what I thought was an effective student discussion one day in a university class that was overwhelmingly white and mostly female. I considered the discussion as successful because it seemed that everybody was participating in roughly equal measure.*

*About thirty minutes into the class I raised a particular issue and asked everyone to contribute their thinking on the topic. A couple of students hesitantly ventured their initial thoughts and I practiced my usual waiting time until eventually everyone had spoken. The contributions were focused and thoughtful and I was pleased by the way the students had brought a variety of perspectives to the issue.*

*I began summarizing the main themes that I thought had emerged from the comments and started to differentiate the contradictory views that I felt had been expressed.*

*Suddenly a white woman participant, Jenn, raised her hand.*

*“Excuse me, we haven’t heard from Mia,” she said.*

*Mia was a young Asian American woman and the thought that I had overlooked her was immediately embarrassing to me.*

*“I’m really sorry about that Mia,” I said. “I don’t know how that happened. My apologies, I don’t know how I missed you. Can we hear from you what you’re thinking about?”*

*Mia made her contribution and shortly afterwards we took a mid-class break.*

*I was still bothered and feeling embarrassed by my not noticing that Mia hadn’t spoken and as I brewed up some tea in my office I started to go over what had just happened.*

*It became obvious to me almost immediately that this was a classic example of a micro aggression. Micro aggressions occur when members of the dominant culture act unwittingly in ways that diminish, demean and marginalize members of minority groups. These actions are so subtle that the receivers are often left wondering ‘did that really happen?’ They ask themselves ‘Am I making too much of something? Am I imagining this?’*

*When challenged, those committing micro aggressions usually respond by saying the person identifying the aggression is being too sensitive, making a mountain out of a molehill, or just misunderstanding what was said or meant. Members of the dominant culture often jump in to excuse and explain away the aggression, saying that it was a slip of the tongue, came out the wrong way, and that no harm was meant. This is often accompanied by character witness testimonials of how the aggressor doesn’t have a racist bone in their body, is a good person, and cares for all people..*

*The class resumed after break and I began by speaking about what had happened when I had overlooked Mia.*

*“I want to thank Jenn for bringing to my attention the fact that I completely overlooked Mia in class. What you’ve just witnessed is a classic example of a racial micro aggression. I had no intent to exclude Mia from the discussion and no awareness of that happening. Yet when I thanked you all for contributing and began to summarize your comments I completely overlooked a woman of color. Micro aggressions are the small acts of exclusion that whites often enact against people of color. They’re not deliberate or intentional and they happen with no wish to harm someone else. But that’s what happened when I went into my summary without noticing that Mia hadn’t spoken.”*

*Almost immediately the only white male member of the group, John, spoke up.*

*“You know Dr. Brookfield I think you’re being way too hard on yourself. You just had a forgetful moment. Not every action has to do with race. Sometimes you’re just tired. You just had a brain fart. I don’t think you should blame yourself. If we take this to the extreme we’re never going to be able to do or say anything without being thought of as racist.”*

*I thought it was beautifully ironic that John’s response captured the dynamic of micro aggressions whereby members of the dominant culture jump in to save others who they feel are being unjustly accused. I, not Mia, had been the one to name my own micro aggression, and yet John had felt compelled to jump in and save me from myself.*

*I told John that he had just exemplified how whites try to excuse other whites who are called out on their micro aggressions.*

*John was offended by my comments. “Well, it’s obvious I can’t say anything in this course without being called a racist!” he exclaimed. “This is clearly not a safe space for me so I’m just going to shut up.”*

*Just then Mia spoke up.*

*“This is not the first time this has happened to me,” she said, her voice quavering. “In every class I’ve been in at this institution I feel I’ve been systematically ignored. It’s like people don’t see me or think I’m in the room.”*

**Coding the Story**

We hand out the story to people so everyone has a written record and ask them to spend five minutes carefully reading it and then to answer three questions on their own:

* What events or actions in the story demonstrate the presence of white supremacy as both an ideology or set of practices?
* How is the specific location of the story affected by wider structures, systems and forces?
* Whose interests inside and outside the specific location of the story are served or harmed by what’s described?

After completing their private responses people then share them in small groups. The whole workshop, class or meeting then reconvenes and we hear what people have talked about.

Here’s how the discussion of *The Brain Fart* might go.

**What events or actions in the story demonstrate the presence of white supremacy as both an ideology or set of practices?**

Since the story is about a racial micro aggression it’s pretty predictable that people will point out how Stephen’s forgetting to include Mia is an example of white supremacy in action because it represents a typically white blindness to the effect of one’s actions. They’ll also acknowledge that Jenn’s interruption represented a challenge to white supremacy.

John’s intervention to excuse and save Stephen is almost always cited as an example of white supremacy in play. By excusing Stephen’s overlooking of Mia, John is saying that race had little significance in the situation, and that this was a one-off event and not any form of systemic exclusion. John’s announcing that he now doesn’t feel safe in the course and that he’s going to withdraw from subsequent conversations is also cited as an example of white fragility (DiAngelo, 2018), the privilege of whites being able to choose when they wish to engage with race.

**How is the specific location of the story affected by wider structures, systems and forces?**

The story takes place in a specific classroom and it’s easy to assume that this constitutes a more or less self-contained universe. But in the small groups participants often start to dig deeper.

*The college*

The first point of analysis is usually the college. People ask about the college’s mission statement and the degree to which the class itself exemplifies or contradicts that statement. They want to know how the college is funded and the health of student enrolments. Like many private institutions it is tuition driven so an overarching concern is to attract the maximum number of students.

We ask people to ponder what influence, if any, that concern might have on the conduct of the class. Has Stephen created a problem by making a white male student decide he doesn’t wish to participate any more in the course? Could this lead to him dropping out and the subsequent loss of his tuition revenue? What will be the financial consequences of Stephen’s naming and teaching about micro aggressions? If communities of color become aware of this work would it cause more students of color to apply to the university? Or, would this work be opposed by alumni as too radical and not in keeping with the university’s traditions and identity?

We’ll then go deeper and ask participants to consider how institutional identities and priorities are defined. This brings levers and influences behind the scenes such as the Board of Trustees into play. People often think that power in colleges resides in the senior leadership team comprised of the President, Provost, and Dean’s Council. In fact, the body ultimately responsible for setting policy, defining goals and assessing compliance with the mission is the Board of Trustees.

Knowing this we urge people to go to the college’s web site and look up the composition of the board. What kind of occupations or interests are represented in the board’s membership? Typically, board members are recruited who can ensure the financial stability of the college by attracting possible donors. Hence, many of them hold prominent positions as CEO’s or CFO’s in major corporations, banks and investment firms. We suggest that participants employ online search engines to find out about the racial mix of the board and ask what it means for the direction of the university to be set and monitored by a group composed of mostly white, business representatives.

*The program or department*

Sometimes we suggest to participants that the analysis could be taken to an ever more local level, that of the particular department or program offering the course. To what degree are the individuals who make up this unit committed to uncovering and challenging racism? Given that the first stage in employee performance appraisals is situated at the department and program level, what implications will this kind of teaching have for those instructors up for reappointment, third year review, tenure or promotion? What criteria are used to assess teachers? Are they assessed for the extent to which they make students feel productively uncomfortable? Is assessment connected to student evaluations of teaching? If so, who designs the forms used and what specific items do they contain?

Student evaluation of teaching forms often measure things such as a teacher’s clarity of explanations, the frequency and depth of feedback provided, and an instructor’s openness to questions. It’s rare to find a form that probes the degree to which students were discomforted, troubled or deeply challenged. We ask people to consider what the criteria for instructor assessment and the items on evaluation forms tell us about the wider forces at work.

This brings us to the ‘students as customers’ orientation of so many non-profit institutions that ironically find themselves operating with a for-profit capitalist logic of needing to attract paying customers. We may also get into the problematic nature of assigning numerical scores to teachers’ performance. Given what we know about the complexity of teaching and learning, especially when it involves questions of racial identity, how can the merits of pedagogic work be accurately represented by assigning a score on a Likert scale of 1 – 5?

**Whose interests inside and outside the specific location of the story are served or harmed by the events described?**

Here we’re asking participants to shift their frame of analysis from someone who is listening to a description of local events to someone who is considering asymmetries of power. In terms of the specific events of the story people often say that it’s obvious that Mia’s interests are served because she got the opportunity to contribute, and that John’s interests are harmed because he felt Stephen had silenced him.

When this analysis is expressed we usually ask participants to go back and read the story again. We explain that we want them to think about the framing of this story within a system of white supremacy and we emphasize that, like all dominant ideologies, white supremacy is designed to be self-sustaining. In other words, it’s set up to keep white power and white normativity in place and viewed as the natural state of things. White supremacy protects itself by appearing to be unremarkable, a form of common sense. For us this suggests a reading of the story that’s directly opposite to the one just described.

Sometimes the reminder of the construct of white supremacy means that people now talk about Mia and John in different ways. Mia is now seen as someone who has a history of being silenced by omission. People quote the fact that she tells the class that being overlooked is her typical experience at the university and now present the story as one that illustrates the continuing power of white supremacy.

John’s situation is now seen as more complicated. Although people still argue that he has been harmed by Stephen’s intervention and they acknowledge his feeling that he is now in an unsafe environment, his decision to remove himself from the discussion is now sometimes positioned as an act of white privilege. John is privileged because he can simply turn away from the reality of race and choose not to think about what it means to live in a racist world. He has been granted the option of denying reality without much harm accruing to him. This, of course, is the direct opposite to the experience of people of color who are robbed of the choice of ignoring the realities of racism and white supremacy.

**Doing a Power Analysis**

Another way to teach structural thinking is to ask people to conduct a power analysis of a story. Here the intent is to make them aware of how power dynamics are embedded in specific events. Although the story focuses on one class in one institution at one particular moment, the interactions described are shaped by wider asymmetries of power.

To help students do this we give a brief typology of three different kinds of power. We discuss what these terms mean and give examples of them in action.

* *Repressive power* - power used to constrain options, limit freedom or maintain the status quo. This could be as simple as a supervisor telling someone not to make trouble by bringing up a contentious issue, or as explosive as paramilitary forces beating up or killing protesters on the street.
* *Emancipatory* *power* - power experienced as motivating or galvanizing that fuels activism and the desire for change. This could be a supervisor asking an employee ‘how can I help you do your best work?’ to *Black Lives Matter* activists mobilizing people quickly for a day of protest immediately after a police killing.
* *Disciplinary power* – power that someone exerts on themselves to make sure they stay in line. This is derived from Foucault’s (1980) work in which the impulse to engage in self-censorship and self-monitoring is posited as the chief way that social control is exercised. A common example is when you argue for more institutional diversity and inclusion so as not to be regarded as too radical or threatening, when really you would prefer to be asking about how to name white supremacy and institutional racism.

We then ask the participants to do two things.

1. Go through each kind of power and say when you think each is being exercised in the story. Do this initially on your own.
2. Try to identify what wider systems, structures and ideologies support the exercise of each kind of power. Again, this is done initially by people on their own.

After participants have answered these questions privately they work in small groups of five to identify and compile the various responses. We then reconvene the whole group and ask each team to present what they’ve found.

**Repressive Power**

Stephen is usually identified as the chief enactor of repressive power. This is because people see his overlooking of Mia as an example of how systems embody white normativity and patriarchy. As the instructor Stephen has the weight of institutional authority behind his actions. That means it takes an act of courage by Jenn to stand up to him and point out his disregarding of a woman of color. Until he was called on his assumption that everyone had participated in the discussion, he believed he was acting in a democratic and inclusive manner.

John is also sometimes cited as exercising repressive power because he has removed himself from any further discussion of racial issues. On the face of it, this seems like a withdrawing or giving up of power because he will not be rationalizing Stephen’s conduct or explaining it away as a benevolent, momentary error. However, in removing himself from the conversation he is denying other students the chance to learn how he experiences and enacts white supremacy. After all, the experts on how white supremacy and patriarchy are learned and internalized are white people. By not contributing to future discussions, John is blocking other students’ opportunity to understand better how dominant ideologies influence whites’ behavior.

**Emancipatory Power**

Because she spoke up to address Stephen’s overlooking of Mia, Jenn is typically cited as the chief enactor of emancipatory power. Her intervention caused Stephen to ask Mia to express her opinion on the matter at hand. It also prompted Stephen to reflect on the incident during the break and to come back and initiate a conversation on micro-aggressions.

Sometimes people get into a deep conversation about the problematic notion of a white person ‘liberating’ a person of color, and the colonial legacy that embodies. Was it condescending of Jenn to intervene, thereby robbing Mia of the chance to speak up for herself? Did it perpetuate the ‘savior’ mentality, whereby whites take on the responsibility to liberate people of color from oppression? Or, was Jenn using her white privilege in a responsible way to bring the exercise of white supremacy to the attention of a powerful white male? After all, she could make the challenge to Stephen’s authority without the risk of being accused of playing the race card, whereas Stephen could have dismissed Mia as seeing a racial motive where none existed.

**Disciplinary Power**

Disciplinary power is power exercised by someone on himself or herself, to ensure they keep their conduct within acceptable tramlines and norms. In this instance Mia is usually identified as the enactor of disciplinary power. She has learned to stay quiet when she is overlooked or ignored either because she has learned that’s how the world works or because she has suffered the consequences of speaking up for herself. Maybe her peers have told her that challenging a white professor for sins of omission will bring punishment down on her. Possibly her elders have instilled in her a cultural reverence of authority and told her it is disrespectful to criticize a teacher. Maybe her complaints in the past have been dismissed or not believed. Perhaps she is just exhausted from having to confront all the micro aggressions and institutional racism she has experienced.

As people talk about Mia’s choice to remain silent the very notion of choice becomes examined. When you know you will be dismissed or punished for an action, what kind of free choice really exists? Participants ponder whether staying silent was a conscious decision on Mia’s part informed by her past experience of criticizing authority, or whether it was a deeply internalized response that she little awareness of. Perhaps this represents the way she had been taught to move through her life.

The discussion then branches into different directions. Sometimes people focus on how elements of Asian American culture and the Confucian tradition instill a notion of good conduct as listening respectfully to elders and automatically attributing wisdom to their actions and decisions. If we talk about Mia needing to stay silent to survive, then we are back to acknowledging the influence of patriarchy and white supremacy. If the discussion goes in this latter direction then we ask participants to research the racial and gender composition of influential bodies such as congress, the presidency, the military, multinational banking, the judiciary and corporate CEO’s. Female participants tend to bring numerous examples of being systematically marginalized or ignored in the male dominated institutions or organizations where they have worked.

**Ideology Critique**

In ideology critique you take a practice that has been designed to be helpful and empowering and examine it for the ways people in an organization, movement or community experience it differently. The intent is to invert our normal thinking about the apparently obvious benefits and common sense logic of institutional ways of functioning such as introducing a new performance appraisal system. In ideology critique people examine how such practices are structured to preserve hierarchies of power. The process alerts participants to blind spots in their own decision-making, and helps organizations understand better how their inbuilt routines regularly exclude certain voices and perspectives.

Facilitators start by presenting an action intended to promote effectiveness or realize the organization’s mission statement. Participants are then asked to do the following on their own.

* Describe the practice and attribute meaning and significance to it in terms of the accepted, dominant view. What do the powers that be say that it’s intended to achieve? What’s the reasoning used to justify its utility?
* Examine that dominant view for internal inconsistencies, paradoxes and contradictions.
* Identify what’s omitted from the dominant view. What are its structured silences and absences? What views, perspectives and experiences are unrepresented in your framing of the practice or action? Why do you think these have been missed?
* Decide who most benefits from the dominant practice and who is most disadvantaged by it.
* Consider how the practice could be re-invented to be fairer and more inclusive.

After answering these questions privately, people are then put into small groups to share their responses. The exercise ends with the whole workshop, meeting, training or class convening to hear from everyone.

**An Ideology Critique Example: Diversifying the Curriculum**

A case we often use is a practice we have seen on many campuses. Faced with the realization that demographic changes mean that students entering higher education will come from more and more diverse racial groups, colleges and universities have attempted to broaden their core curriculum to include more authors of color and to introduce modules dealing with race. Along with this initiative goes an effort to recruit more faculty of color. The institution then announces their new diversity initiative to the world as evidence of their responsiveness to communities of color and their commitment to diversity.

*Describe the practice and attribute meaning and significance to it in terms of the accepted, dominant view. What is it intended to achieve? What’s the reasoning used to justify its utility?*

Colleges and universities want to demonstrate that they are non-racist and inclusive so as to attract students from diverse racial backgrounds. They believe that if they include more authors of color This will make white students more racially aware and help students of color feel that their lives and experiences are represented and valued on campus. This will lead to lower attrition rates for students of color and help white students develop an appreciation for the contributions of scholars of color. As a result, the campus climate will become friendlier and welcoming for students of color, and white students will be helped to develop an antiracist identity.

*Examine that view for internal inconsistencies, paradoxes and contradictions*.

One possible inconsistency concerns the way that authors of color and modules are positioned. If students see them as add-ons, rather than comprising a permanently altered center, then this initiative will be seen as a temporary band aid covering a far deeper structural and cultural problem. Also, if the curriculum is presented as a smorgasbord whereby students can pick and choose which authors to read and which modules to study, we could quickly end up with students of color volunteering to study authors of color and race-based topics, while white students stick with the Eurocentric canon. This will potentially re-segregate the curriculum.

There is also the possible contradiction that while the curriculum is emphasizing difference and divergence, the teaching methods and assessment rubrics remain unaltered. So, whilst this curricular reform is meant to celebrate different ways of experiencing the world, it is taught in ways that privilege text over oral communication and words over images. Traditions of oral storytelling and collectivity prized by some cultures may well not be reflected in how students’ learning is evaluated. Sharing ideas might be interpreted as plagiarism and there will be no opportunity to present group, rather than individually completed, assignments.

Finally, who will teach these new courses? Asking instructors who have little knowledge or training in this area to do this can backfire horribly, leaving students of color feeling exposed and unprotected. Without experience in leading contentious discussions, teachers could end up doing more harm than good by not challenging the racist views of some white students.

*Identify what is being omitted from the dominant view. What are its structured silences and absences? What views, perspectives and experiences are unrepresented in the practice or action? Why do you think these have been missed?*

Much will depend on who designs these curricular changes. If a mostly white committee chooses the authors of color to be studied, and designs the modules dealing with race, then the authentic experiences of people of color may be missing, particularly the expression of righteous anger and strong criticism of white supremacy. A white view of which authors of color are acceptable and how units dealing with race should be framed can lead to the exclusion of radical scholarship that challenges the foundations of the academy and calls out white supremacy.

The reason why radical scholarship and contentious modules are not included is to protect the interests of the white members of the institution. They wish to demonstrate their multicultural commitment without being called to personal account.

*Decide who benefits from the dominant practice and who is most disadvantaged by it*.

If ‘softer’ authors of color are chosen, if race-based modules are designed to celebrate individual diversity rather than delve into structural racism, and if students can choose from a smorgasbord of options (thus allowing white students to omit reading radical authors of color or studying racism) those who benefit from this practice are whites. Members of the board of trustees and the senior leadership team can issue news announcements that highlight the curricular changes as evidence of their racial responsiveness. Faculty who teach these kinds of courses can escape examining their own personal learned racism or naming the racist policies of the institution. If enrolments increase and attrition decreases, then the board of trustees can claim to be managing the institution’s financials prudently.

Most disadvantaged are the students of color that this institutional effort is officially designed to serve. They will have been served a false bill of goods and will experience a counterfeit antiracist effort; one that looks as though it’s tackling the problem seriously but in fact is designed to keep things exactly the same.

If, however, the authors of color chosen directly address systemic racism, and if the new race-based modules focus on how white supremacy is learned and disseminated as representing a common sense, obvious way of interpreting the world, then the interests of people of color are served. And if word gets out and about in communities of color that the university is serious about tackling racism then the institution will benefit by attracting increased numbers of applicants of color and producing testimonials from alumni that speak to its genuine anti-racist identity.

*How could the practice/action be re-invented to be fairer and more inclusive?*

One possibility is to make sure that there is a high representation of students and faculty of color on committees charged with designing and implementing any curricular changes. This will help prevent the diversification project from becoming a showcase meant to deflect criticism and reject any serious institutional reappraisal. Another option might be to invite members of communities of color that the institution serves to suggest topics that would be at the center of the new race-based modules. These individuals could also serve on an oversight committee charged with making sure the institution sticks to its commitment to combat racism. Ensuring a built in mechanism to monitor how the initiative is going, and sharing those results with the whole community, is an important accountability mechanism.

**Thinking Structurally in Community**

Thinking structurally is a complex and difficult process that does not happen overnight. It qualifies as an authentic example of transformative learning as defined by Mezirow (1991) and, as such, is primarily a social learning process. The cognitive moves involved in thinking structurally entail shedding as much as possible the individualist ideology that is so embedded in American culture. It requires stepping back from the minutiae of one’s life and seeing them not just as personally determined, but as reflecting wider social trends and the interplay of economic and political forces.

This is what the mid-twentieth century theorist C. Wright Mills (1959) called cultivating the sociological imagination, the effort to understand that private troubles such as getting divorced or being fired are always connected to public issues such as the destruction of local economies and the growth of monopoly capitalism. If you work for a small business in a rural town and a giant Walmart is constructed that takes your customers, this may result in you being laid off, induce money troubles and trigger a loss of self-worth. All these events can trigger a spiral resulting in divorce, drug use and maybe self-harm.

Making a paradigmatic leap to viewing the world structurally and developing a sociological imagination is a process that takes time. It usually happens incrementally and involves multiple movements forward that are then quickly followed by regressions to earlier ways of thinking. Crucial to this journey is a community of peers who are also trying to think structurally about the way that systems and ideologies shape what feel like individual decisions.

In empirical studies of how adults learn to view the world in a fundamentally altered way, it appears that a community of inquirers is crucial (Taylor and Cranton, 2009). This community is what Boyd (2014) calls a container, a resting place in which people can, in the company of others on a similar quest, test out new understandings and experiment with new identities. As with all forms of critical thinking (Brookfield, 2012) learning to think structurally happens best when it’s experienced as a social learning process. People discover assumptions and new perspectives most meaningfully when peers brings them to their attention. This is why thinking structurally needs to be located in a learning community comprised of others struggling to comprehend the world this way.

This finding is hardly surprising if we consider how difficult it is to learn about our assumptions and worldviews simply by deciding we will do some deep self-examination. Even if we complete a sustained period of self-reflection and do daily journaling on race (Kendi, 2020) we’ll need to discuss what we’re thinking and writing with others on a similar journey. Becoming aware of the mental frames that determine how we understand our experiences is a puzzling and contradictory task. Very few of us can get very far doing this on our own. No matter how much we may think we have an accurate sense of ourselves, we are stymied by the fact that we're using our own interpretive filters to become aware of our own interpretive filters! This is the equivalent of a dog trying to catch its tail, or of trying to see the back of your head while looking in the bathroom mirror. To become aware of structural and systemic factors we need to find friends, colleagues and peers that reflect back to us a stark and differently highlighted picture of who we are and what we do.

**Final Comment**

Thinking structurally is a crucial cognitive move in becoming a white anti-racist. Moving away from an individualist ideology means coming to understand our own learned racism not as an inherent moral flaw but as a very predictable result of growing up subject to quietly effective white supremacist conditioning. When we see our own racist acts and inclinations as structurally determined, this helps us move past an extended fixation on guilt and shame. It’s easy to spend all your time obsessed with your past sins and embarrassed and mortified by the casual racism you’ve enacted. This is a dead end. Thinking structurally lifts you out of that extended fixation on your flaws and moves you more quickly to activism.

A structural perspective emphasizes the humanly created nature of white supremacy. Anything that has been created by humans can be dismantled and replaced by them. Of course doing this will be a long and difficult process that will require collective effort. Antiracist training that focuses on changing individual behavior so one is less influenced by implicit biases and racial stereotypes is an important starting point. But real, substantive change will only come when structures, systems and policies are fundamentally altered or replaced and that will only happen if people work together in political parties and social movements. So for us thinking structurally is the mental kick-starter to collective action.