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“My Feelings Are Not About You”: Personal Experience as a Move of Whiteness

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The concepts of *personal experience* and *speaking from experience* have figured prominently in a number of educational practices oriented toward social justice (Chor, Fleck, Fan, Joseph, & Lyter, 2003). Anti-racism work within teacher education, for example, has traditionally proposed guidelines for class discussions and dialogue. These guidelines, intended to foster a climate in which a range of perspectives can be affirmed, often consist of confidentiality, the practicing of critical self-reflection, and a consideration of multiple perspectives. One guideline addresses the practice of *personalized knowledge*, in which students speak for themselves and from their own experience. This guideline is meant to prevent students from universalizing their perspectives (for example, “Everybody knows that...”), and to encourage awareness of positionality and the racialized locations from which we each speak.

History has taught us, however, that any resistive practice can come to serve the very interests it was developed to oppose. For example, affirmative action discourse is now being used to support white males; men who hold jobs previously held by women are characterized as having “broken a glass ceiling” (The Dailey, 2005). This paper examines one situation in which a resistive practice has come to serve the interests it was designed to oppose: In interracial discussions of racism, the practice of speaking from experience was used by whites (and primarily white women) to inoculate their claims against interrogation or critique. We refer to this strategy as the discourse of personal experience (as performed by whites) and have not seen this discourse discussed in the whiteness literature within the field of education. In this paper we will explore how this discourse of personal experience, as performed by white participants in our study, functioned in an interracial dialogue about race with white student teachers and students of color. Our goals are twofold: to explicate how the discourse of personal experience functioned to hold white racism and privilege in place, and to unsettle the discursive authority that this discourse offers. After briefly reviewing the theoretical literature, we analyze the results of one study of interracial dialogue, using a post-structural and discourse-oriented methodology.

The Theory of Experience

The notion of experience has an extensive pedigree in education. John Dewey’s work, for example, which emphasizes experiential learning, continues to inspire and shape educational debate. More recently, hermeneutic traditions such as Hans-Georg Gadamer’s have re-articulated various perspectives on experience and education (Kerdeman, 2003). Educational research, especially qualitative methodologies, has spawned myriad publications on the experiences of teachers or students or organizations with the hope of casting light on the complexities of every day practice. Reviewing this body of literature is beyond the scope of this

paper. Instead, we will focus on two issues: (1) The development of experience as a way to counter authoritarian and expert-based knowledge claims, and (2) Recent criticism of the assumptions about and utility of concepts of experience. We suggest ways to preserve some of its benefits (for example, keep people talking about their own lives and not making claims about other groups) while resisting it as a way to end constructive dialogue and critique.

Ideas of experience have been most extensively elaborated upon in feminist theory and practice, especially in recent years (Bannerji, 1992; Chay, 1993; Kruks, 2001; Mardorossian, 2002; Mohanty, 1992; Mulinari & Sandell, 1999). In feminism, valuing experience is a response to authoritarian knowledge claims that dismiss women's accounts of their own lives as biased (subjective), unreliable (hysterical), or trivial (idiosyncratic and private). As a resistive practice, valuing experience collapses two different rationales for privileging first-person accounts: one epistemological, and one political. The epistemological role of experience itself assumes two forms—a modest claim that women's accounts should be considered useful data about social life, and ironically, a transcendental claim that such accounts are *privileged* or *fundamental* sources of insight (Allen & Cloyes, 2005; Foss & Foss, 1994). The political rationale is usually congruent with the modest epistemological claim: women's accounts (or the accounts of any marginalized group) deserve serious attention and should not be over-ridden by accounts of more privileged groups (which are often framed not as accounts but as *truth*) (Allen & Cloyes, 2005; Stone-Mediatore, 1998). A more radical rationale for privileging these accounts is the epistemological claim that they have greater "truth" status. Attributing greater truth to marginalized accounts stems from Hegel's Master-Slave dialectic. Hegel argued that slaves had to understand both their own world and that of their masters, while the latter had no need to understand the daily life of slaves (Bellamy & Leontis 1993).

These radical epistemological and political rationales have been extensively critiqued. Epistemological privilege is difficult to sustain; marginalized groups and individuals can certainly hold mistaken or unproductive understandings of social life (Hardin, 2003; Scott, 1992). Furthermore, deconstructionist orientations have decried the tendency toward essentialism in such accounts (for example, whose interpretation counts as privileged?). Categories such as woman or African American are power and knowledge classifications that are already caught up in the practices being opposed by the radical traditions. Hence, deconstructionists argue, they cannot be used without reproducing at least some of the politics that produced them in the first place (Allen, 1996; Richard, 1996). Scholars following democratic and dialogic traditions have also criticized this privileging as simply replacing one authoritarian account with another.

The Language of Experience

Discursively-oriented critics have raised concerns about how experience functions in various forms of discourse (Mardorossian, 2002). Perhaps the most influential of these critics is historian Joan Scott, who argues that experience is constituted linguistically and thus needs to be explained historically. For example, how did someone come to encounter the world within any particular vocabulary or framework (Scott, 1992)? Critical scholars have noted that research claims about experience often conflate notions of *experience as witness testimony* (for example, what happened to someone?) and *experience as confession* (making public the private contents of one's mind or soul). The latter move is deeply embedded in the individualism and Cartesianism that—according to discursive psychologists—characterizes Western notions of self (Allen & Cloyes, 2005; Martin, 2002). As Cartesianism posits, when one's language—one's ideas—are seen as existing *in the mind* and *finding expression* (being pressed out into public space), then the mind becomes non-social, private, and inaccessible to anyone outside of the individual. We will return to this argument when we analyze how white participants in a racially diverse group addressing racism, positioned experience in their own performances. To prepare for that discussion, we now turn to the more specific context of whiteness and anti-racist educational practices.

Whiteness and Anti-Racist Education

Whiteness refers to dimensions of racism that serve to elevate white people over people of color. Recognizing that the terms we are using are not “theory neutral ‘descriptors’ but theory-laden constructs inseparable from systems of injustice” (Allen, 1996, p. 95), we use the terms *white* and *whiteness* to describe a social process. Ruth Frankenberg (1993) defines whiteness as multi-dimensional:

Whiteness is a location of structural advantage, of race privilege. Second, it is a “standpoint,” a place from which white people look at ourselves, at others, and at society. Third, “whiteness” refers to a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed (p. 1).

Frankenberg and other theorists (Fine, 1997; Dyer, 1997; Sleeter, 1993; Van Dijk, 1993) use whiteness to signify a set of locations that are historically, socially, politically, and culturally produced, and which are intrinsically linked to dynamic relations of domination. Whiteness is thus conceptualized as a constellation of processes and practices, rather than as a discrete entity or act (such as skin color or telling a joke). This definition counters the dominant

representation of racism in mainstream education as isolated incidents that some individuals may or may not *do*, and goes beyond naming specific privileges (McIntosh, 1988). Whites are theorized as actively shaped, affected, defined, and privileged through their racialization, and their individual and collective consciousnesses formed within it (Frankenberg, 1997; Morrison, 1992; Tatum, 1997).

Whiteness scholars within the field of education seek to unravel the racialized intersection between social position, knowledge construction, and power (Apple, 1997; Macedo & Bartolome, 1999; Nieto, 2002; Sleeter, 1993; Tatum, 2002). In highlighting the power basis of knowledge construction, John Fiske (1989) asserts:

Knowledge is never neutral. It never exists in an empiricist, objective relationship to the real. Knowledge is power, and the circulation of knowledge is part of the social distribution of power. The discursive power to construct a commonsense reality that can be inserted into cultural and political life is central in the social relationships of power (pp. 149-150).

Interrogating whiteness has emerged from the frequent failure of education initiatives to adequately identify where change needs to occur. Many traditional solutions to inequitable educational outcomes have been directed towards the problems of racialized “others” and to the challenges of implementing culturally relevant pedagogy; few have addressed the workings of the dominant culture itself (Banks, 1995). Cynthia Levine-Rasky (2000) calls this misidentification of the problem “the focus on the space between ‘us’ and ‘them’” (p. 272). To conceptualize whiteness not as a fixed and unified variable, but rather as a set of practices reveals the performative dimension of racialization. By exposing power dynamics, a discourse on whiteness attempts to show not just how whiteness oppresses people of color, but how whiteness elevates white people (McIntosh, 1988). The elevation of white people over others is constantly being contested by marginalized groups, and must be actively maintained by dominant culture. As Michelle Fine (1998) states, “Whiteness, like all colors, is being manufactured, in part, through institutional arrangements. Schools and work, for example, do not merely manage race; they create and enforce racial meanings” (pg. 58). But because race is negotiated, rather than fixed, it is also unstable and susceptible to acts of resistance and contestation (Flax, 1998; Frankenberg, 2001).

A major goal of a discourse on whiteness within education is to make apparent what is often transparent or obscured, including the circuits of power in racialized intergroup dynamics (Fine, 1997). Identifying the production of whiteness is an attempt to break open one of these circuits, exposing aspects of its operation. This provides an opportunity to track the flow of power and potentially interrupt it, for whiteness maintains its dominance in part through invisibility

(Flax, 1998). The study discussed in this article was designed to *track power*—to examine empirically how whiteness was performed under contestation via an inter-group dialogue on racism among future teachers. We anchored the study in post-structuralist perspectives on discourse.

Discourse Analysis

Discourse analysis is the study of language as action in social contexts. It is a method of investigating the back-and-forth dialogues that constitute social action, along with the patterns of signification and representation that constitute culture (Davies & Harre, 1990; Gee, 1999; Wetherell, Taylor, & Yates, 2002). James Gee (1999) states that “Meaning is not general and abstract, not something that resides in dictionaries, or even in general symbolic representations inside people’s heads. Rather, it is situated in specific social and cultural practices, and it is continually transformed in those practices” (p. 63). Discourse analysis is attentive to the uses of language and how those uses position speakers in relation to others, both those who are physically present and those who belong to larger categories of others (i.e., social groups). Language is conceptualized as historically and socially situated, and discourse analysis is concerned with how ideologies are communicated and what the multiple effects of that communication might be (Evans, 2002).

Discourse analysis is a useful tool for explicating how the discourse of personal experience supports whiteness, because it allows for a nuanced analysis of the socially- and historically-informed practices that are available for negotiating racial positions. Discourse analysis can reveal processes of racism that otherwise would be difficult to establish, or that would be formally denied by the majority of participants (Van Dijk, 1993). In differentiating discourse analysis from other frameworks for studying inequality, Teun Van Dijk (1993) states that “Although there are many directions in the study and critique of social inequality, the way we approach these questions and dimensions is by focusing on *the role of discourse in the (re)production and challenge of dominance*” (p. 300, emphasis in the original). In other words, we are interested in the social processes by which white people produce and maintain their racial position and power in situations in which their position is being challenged. Better understanding of how this process works may enable teachers and others to shape group conversations to destabilize, rather than reinforce, white privilege.

Methodology

This study involved observing and videotaping four inter-group dialogues on racism among future elementary and secondary school teachers (for more

information on the methodology used in this study, see DiAngelo, 2004). A number of key components in an interracial dialogue on race are relevant to this study. In contrast to similar discussions taking place in a classroom setting, the explicit agenda of these dialogues was to talk about race—therefore, the focus on race was not competing with other topics or processes. Our goal was to observe the ways in which white participants perform racially in these dialogues; how the mechanisms of discourse get “recruited, ‘on-site,’ to ‘pull off’ specific social activities and identities (membership in various social groups and institutions)” (Gee, 1999, p. 1).

These racial dialogues removed a number of key obstructions that typically manifest in classrooms: a white social taboo that precludes talking directly about race; a power differential between students and teachers that can motivate participants to attempt to perform *correctly*; pedagogical practices, such as lectures, that can thwart discussion; and physical logistics that make it easier for participants to hide, for example, behind tables and in back rows. To minimize these obstructions as much as possible, the study was designed as a series of facilitated dialogues (Weiler, 1995). Two trained and experienced facilitators from different social locations (one identified as a woman of color and the other as a white woman) guided the discussion and led exercises designed to bring reactions and reflections about race to the surface (Nagda, Zuniga, & Sevig, 1995). Using an interracial team of facilitators also allowed researchers to observe how participant responses to the facilitators varied by racial location.

Participant Selection

Participants were recruited primarily from the Teacher Education Program (TEP) at a major research university in a large urban area in the Northwest United States. A third-party email was sent to all TEP master’s students, both first- and second-year cohorts, inviting them to participate in a research study involving a series of facilitated interracial dialogues on race. Students’ area of study or discipline was not important because the analysis was tied to a wider, macro-level analysis of how whiteness functions overall in U.S. society (Dyer, 1997; Fine, 1997; Frankenberg, 2001; Roediger, 1997; Sleeter, 1993).

The TEP program at this university, like many others, is challenged by a lack of racial diversity (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Due to this limitation, we recruited several participants of color from other departments to which we have access, such as the School of Social Work. However, all of the white participants and one student of color were recruited from the TEP program. The final group consisted of 7 students who identified as white, 5 students who identified as people of color¹, a facilitator of color (Native American) and a white facilitator.

Data Collection

Each of the four two-hour dialogues was videotaped and observed by both authors of this paper. Robin DiAngelo, a white woman, sat in the back of the room and observed each session, taking field notes. After an initial introduction in session one, she did not participate in the dialogues in any way. David Allen, a white male, videotaped the sessions from a control booth. After an initial introduction in session one, he was not visible to participants, although he could hear and observe the sessions from the control booth. The videotapes permitted revisiting sessions and allowed us to secure reliability via agreement from other researchers in whiteness studies. Although the perspectives of all researchers are situated in and limited by their social locations, as white researchers studying whiteness, we faced very specific challenges in our analysis. These challenges ranged from the relative invisibility of whiteness to us as whites, to our positions as white researchers within the context of U.S. culture and our own socialized investment in and enactment of white privilege (Frankenberg, 1997). One way to make more visible (and hopefully reduce) our own role in the reinstatement of whiteness was to also ask for the perspectives of the facilitators, as well as the perspectives of other content experts of different racial locations. Including this range of viewpoints in our analysis served to ensure inter-rater reliability.

Overall, the study documented discourses and practices in racial dialogues that functioned to support white domination and privilege (modes of resistance to de-centering whiteness). For this article, we are focusing on one dimension of the analysis: the role of *experience discourse* as performed by whites in the dialogues. The discourse of experience involved a range of signifiers—terms such as “perspective” and “feelings” that are linked to and support the role of experience in shaping these conversations. We analyzed the data (field notes and videotapes) using Gee’s (1999) model of discourse analysis which emphasizes that discourses are not just single terms (for example, “experience” or “family”) but a chain of signifiers that mutually support the practices being analyzed.

Gee (1999) argues that the main functions of language are to *scaffold* relationships and social structures. Thus, language is a tool that people use to create, maintain, and change relationships and to perform institutional practices that, in turn, create, maintain, reinforce, or challenge social hierarchies (Allen, 2002). We analyzed the data using Gee’s (1999) model of discourse analysis. In analyzing whether social processes enhanced, diminished, or were irrelevant to the production of whiteness, we returned to the literature for key definitions and tenets of whiteness. We used these tenets as a kind of template with which to compare and contrast our findings. Gee’s (1999) questions linking discourses enacted in social interactions with larger discourses are relevant here:

- What are the relationships among the different discourses being used (institutionally, in society, or historically)?

- How are different discourses aligned or in contention?

We coded conversational patterns by race (based on participant self-identification), by looking at how participants deployed and contested various dominant racial narratives that have been in play over time and across a range of institutions, and by how and when participants and facilitators used these racial narratives. We also coded themes that emerged in the dialogues, such as purpose, unity, and personal experience.

We related these themes and narratives to larger social and historical patterns of whiteness identified in the literature. This coding provided links to the larger discourses and institutions that participants were employing. As Henry Louis Gates (1995) states:

People arrive at an understanding of themselves and the world through narratives—narratives purveyed by school teachers, newscasters, “authorities,” and all the other authors of our common sense. Counternarratives are, in turn, the means by which groups contest the dominant reality and the framework of assumptions that supports it (p. 57).

Specific examples of these questions as applied to this study, include: Do participants take up discourses that position themselves or others as individuals or as group members? If so, who (by race) does so and under what circumstances? Are these discourses (individual vs. group member) contested? If so, by whom? Do individuals switch between discourses—specifically, do they sometimes position themselves as individuals and at other times as a group member? What are the institutional consequences of discourses in contention? For example, does a discourse of the individual support or contest larger institutional structures and racialized social arrangements? Does a discourse of group membership support or contest institutional structures and racialized social arrangements?

In linking our analysis of the dialogues to the context in which they were situated—teacher education in the United States—we addressed education as a normative institution whose role within the wider society is to replicate stratified relations of race, class, and gender (Adams, Bell & Griffith, 1997; Derman-Sparks & Phillips, 1997). As such, education is a very significant backdrop against which whiteness was being defended or contested.

That’s Just My Personal Experience

One significant form of the discourse of personal experience surfaced through the use of ground rules. One of the ground rules stated at the first session was to use personalized knowledge. In other words, participants were asked to speak for themselves rather than make general statements for the entire group. This ground rule was intended to help open the dialogue by allowing alternative interpretations and perspectives to emerge. However, white participants often

invoked personalized knowledge in a way that functioned to protect their interpretations rather than broadening them. Several times throughout the dialogues, white participants ended a rebuttal statement with the disclaimer, “That’s just my personal experience.” When used at the end of a statement, this phrase claimed the experience as personal and therefore uncontested, and thus precluded any question of the statement. These statements are part of a rhetorical or discursive practice claims an individual position instead of acting as a bridge or interplay (Billig, 2001; Tannen, 2001).

The following excerpt is an example of how a white participant used her experience to block further exploration of her statement. When Tiffany is told by a number of participants of color that Europeans and European Americans are seen as white, she responds with a personal feeling statement:

TIFFANY (W): I’m uncomfortable with the label “white” based on what I have learned that people of color perceive “white” to mean and represent. That’s what makes me uncomfortable with it. So I’m uncomfortable being associated with what I perceive to be the common perception of what “white” is.

RICH (POC): But European Americans are white.

TIFFANY (W): Yeah. I mean, I guess I feel like—

RICH (POC): Well, she said that she felt comfortable identifying herself as a European American. European Americans are white. Columbus, Pizarro, all these guys that came from Italy and Spain and all over, um, they’re all white. They’re all European American. Um, I don’t know. When I—when I look at you, I see a white person.

TIFFANY (W): But the term “white” conjures up different feelings, I think, in people who are European American, from my perspective.

When Rich tells Tiffany that he sees her as white, she responds with a feeling statement in order to reclaim her position as an individual outside of a racialized group position. She rejects Rich’s interpretation of her as white based on the simple assertion that she doesn’t feel white. This lack of feeling is posited as enough to sustain her rebuttal. She finalizes her move by stating that she is speaking “from my perspective.”

Rich and others have offered Tiffany an interpretation of herself that is different than her own. From a turn-taking perspective, she could respond with a gesture that would open both her self-interpretation and the dialogue up to further insight and explication, such as asking why they see her the way they do. Instead, she employs a personal psychological reality assertion, making this a classic Cartesian move (Allen & Cloyes, 2004). Tiffany’s perspective is conceptualized as internal, private, and individual rather than as social or interrelational. This individual basis provides her claim with validity, and thereby positions her as the only expert on her interpretation. This move depoliticizes experience and says, in effect, “since nobody else has access to my personal experience, it is therefore incontestable.”

Tiffany's language employs a constellation of terms linked to personal experience discourse (including her choice of the word "perspective"). For example, she also offers a number of feeling statements. In the above excerpt, she uses the word "uncomfortable" three times. She also repeatedly states that she does not "feel" white. Her discomfort with the label, as well as her not feeling white, are enough for her to sustain a rebuttal in the face of counter statements by participants of color. Although they repeatedly try to engage her in reflecting on herself as white, signaling that it is important to them for her to do so, she holds her position by repeating that she just doesn't feel white and that it is not her experience. These statements, framed in psychological terms, reduce racial privilege to a feeling-state, something that she either feels or does not feel. If she does not feel it, then it is not important and does not count.

The personal experience move is tightly coupled with positioning oneself first and foremost as an individual. Positioning oneself as an individual is a classic signal of whiteness, and works to de-contextualize and de-politicize race (Ellsworth, 1997; Fine, 1997; Morrison, 1992; Tatum, 2001). Tiffany's earlier statement occurred in the first dialogue. The following exchange occurred in session two:

TIFFANY (W): I was raised in a diverse neighborhood, and I went to diverse schools, and my family is very diverse, and that's my experience. If you have any questions about it, I'm happy to tell you more. I don't know—I don't—this didn't hit a whole bunch of nerves, because I had never been—I never felt terribly white; I felt very un-white, really. I feel very fortunate for that. But my experience may be different from a different white person's experience, so—and I think it was, given what I heard. And I'm really proud to say that I've had a wonderfully diverse, you know, experience growing up, and I think I'm better for it. I think it's really been a gift, so.

BECCA (WF): Tiffany, what do you mean, you don't feel white?

TIFFANY (W): What I mean by that is that I think the stereotype of—I think that often a label and a stereotype is associated with being white. And because my family is not a hundred percent white, by any stretch, and because my experience in this world has been of exposure to all sorts of different ethnic and racial groups, I feel like that has contributed to my—a broadening of my experience. I mean, I don't know what to say besides that. So, my skin looks this way, but I have Jewish ancestry, so somehow that's—I mean, that qualifies me, right? I mean—anyway.

MALENA (FOC): Qualifies you for what?

TIFFANY (W): As being a member of a group that has been racially discriminated against. I mean, "qualify" is the wrong word; I'm sorry if that offends anybody, but—I'm done talking for a while.

In the above excerpt, Tiffany attempts three countermoves to the challenge to see herself as white. She begins by conceptualizing racism in terms of feeling

and experience. When her feeling statement is challenged by Becca, she tries to discount her whiteness by invoking her Jewish ancestry. When Malena challenges that move, Tiffany abruptly ends the discussion. Although this excerpt is a particularly explicit example of the use of personal experience to protect a white position, Tiffany wasn't the only white participant who employed this move when her self-perception was questioned.

In the following exchange, Courtney, a white participant, responds to challenges by Becca, the white facilitator, and Carolyn, a participant of color. They have challenged some of the white participants who posited that racism is a phenomenon that existed in the past but is not present in the younger generation.

BECCA (WF): Uh, there've been a couple of things that people have been talking about that have been really frustrating for me but have been things, I think, that I've felt at—at various times in my consciousness as well. Um, and one of the things that I've noticed is that people keep talking about racism as first of all being a generational thing. The white people continuously have been referring to racism as a generational thing, and I think that, for me when I do that, and when I look at my experience on that—when I do that, that's when I'm keeping that separate from myself, and by doing that I'm not owning my own racism. And the fact is I've been socialized in a society where racism is prevalent, and for me to, as a white person, put it out there that it's a generational thing, I think is very unfair. And I don't know how it affects other people, but—

CAROLINE (POC): I kind of wanted you to talk about this idea—if white people could really accept that racism exists. I notice with white activists is that sometimes you get to a point where they are just so—"I'm active, I'm active. I'm so active that I could never be racist." But to me it feels like sometimes they are the hardest people to target, because they feel like they're not racist, "because I do not believe in racism, so I am not racist." And so, I think it's really important to really recognize it, because you still have social power, and you are still going to benefit and there is still going to be racism.

Like Tiffany, Courtney draws on both her feelings and her personal experience in her response to these challenges:

COURTNEY (W): I think, um, speaking for myself, but I think—from my experiences with, you know, older neighbors or people, um—and there aren't many because I do live in... and I have all my life—and often you don't hear a lot of White people in... openly, you know, speaking in a way that that sounds racist or that's openly talking about stereotypes. There has to be an interplay there and to put it all on—you know, someone coming from the outside and telling a white person, well, "you really—you shouldn't feel that way," you know, it's like "what does that mean?" Because my feelings are not about you.

In Courtney's statement that her feelings "are not about you," she presents her feelings as standing alone or outside social processes, rather than as a function

of social processes. Her feelings are thus positioned as independent of the social, political, or historical context in which she is embedded. Here she draws on a deeply individual discourse. By positioning herself as an individual, with a collection of rights, she closes her position off from others—for Courtney, as an individual, has the right to think and feel whatever she wants. Conversationally, this is a blocking move that ends any challenge to her perceptions. Courtney has the opportunity to learn, for example, why the white facilitator, who has experience in dialogues about race, feels frustrated that racism has been relegated to the past. Instead, Courtney defends her position, negates the others, and closes off further exploration.

Through her language, Courtney has also shifted the emphasis from her views or her perceptions to her feelings. Courtney says that she *feels* that racism is generational, she doesn't say she *thinks* it is. Had she kept her language in the realm of thinking, she would have been more susceptible to challenge. Thinking, by drawing from the rational realm, is a more public space and thus more open to contestation. Feelings, however, are considered to be in the realm of the personal or private space, and thus are not available for contestation (Allen & Cloyes, 2005). During this exchange, Courtney also states:

COURTNEY (W): I think it—I think it depends on the individual experience. And since we're all speaking from personal experience, um, I know that I was—I got a little upset to hear people say that they don't think it's fair that someone would say it's generational, because it's a personal thing if we all know our own families and our own communities and we know what we have perceived in our own families and communities. And so I think it's a valid point—if that's what you want to say, then that's what you should be able to say. I just want to put that out there.

Here Courtney invokes the corollary discourse of rights that accompanies personal experience. To attack feelings is to break two rules of the discourse of personal experience: (1) Courtney has the right to feel the way she does, and (2) Challenging her feelings risks hurting her (you can hurt someone's feelings, but not their thinking), which makes a challenge to feelings inherently unfair. Cartesianism further protects her by segregating feelings in private minds that are unavailable for public examination. By shifting the discourse from perceptions to feelings, Courtney has protected her interpretations from challenge and simultaneously assumed the higher moral ground in the dialogue.

Discussion

Although encouraging the use of experience was developed as a critical practice designed to undermine elite expertise (Schlegel, 2002), in this study the

discourse of personal experience functioned to protect elites—in other words, it privileged whites. This protection was accomplished by positing a white participant's interpretations as the product of a discrete individual, outside the realm of socialization, rather than as the product of multidimensional social interaction. The individual is then responded to as a private mind in the Cartesian sense (Allen & Cloyes, 2005). The discourse of personal experience has particularly significant consequences for dialogues in which the stated goal is to gain understanding of racialized perspectives. Removing these political dimensions mitigates against social change and preserves conventional arrangements (Levine-Rasky, 2000).

In their deconstruction of the use of experience in nursing research, David Allen and Kristin Cloyes (2005) focus on the politics of language. They question the use of experience as evidence in qualitative research, and problematize experience from the framework that language is socially produced. They note that researchers who rely on their subjects' accounts of experience as evidence often do this in two contradictory ways. Sometimes they use experience in terms of the research subject's interpretations of events. This is a sort of *witness discourse*—we ask someone what happened.” In this context, the account is positioned as one perspective on a public event. Consequently, it can be challenged in a number of ways. On the other hand, experience is positioned as internal, private reality, and the account functions as a *confessional discourse*—reporting what no one else has access to. This lack of access can be practical (no one saw me do it) or ontological (I had impure thoughts). One of the problems with these approaches is that they move back and forth between positing experience as the internal perceptions of an individual and positing experience as interpretations of an external event. This variance in the function of experience as a signifier is usually unmarked, but it is not without political significance. As Allen and Cloyes (2005) state: “So the use of experience as evidence, and the relationship between that evidence and the researcher's conclusions, reproduces the same unmarked shift between individuals and events” (p. 5). In this study, by moving their accounts of racism and white privilege into the “confessional” mode (even if the confession is denial), white participants made their accounts more difficult to challenge.

However, we can and do have ways to challenge self-interpretations. We speak of people *fooling themselves* or *being in denial* when we believe we have a better interpretation of their situation than they do. And there are social rules about when and how such a challenge can be raised (Henriques, Hollway, Urwin, Venn, & Walkerdine, 1984). As it relates to this study, a significant component of Allen and Cloyes' (2005) analysis is their identification of the assumptions underpinning the use of experience. These assumptions are: (1) Only the individual has access to her own mind, and (2) She cannot be mistaken about what is going on in her own mind (or, at least, there is no way to verify what occurs in someone else's mind). These assumptions function to make experience

a kind of sacred text in qualitative analysis and to close claims of experience off from interrogation; how can one possibly question the personal experiences of others?

If we follow Allen and Cloyes' (2005) suggestion to conceptualize experience as a specific discourse with political consequences, we can ask how white participants used experience in the dialogues. Raising questions about claims to experience can illuminate new ways of understanding meaning-making in social interaction. In terms of social co-production, problematizing the concept of experience might shed light on how discourses function in this context, and in particular, how they function to protect whiteness.

If whites use personal experience as the evidence for understanding racism, then whites are limited in their ability to validate racism's damaging effects on people of color. Relying on the discourse of experience enables whites to reject claims that racism is real and that it has tangible effects on the lives of people of color, because they do not witness these effects first-hand. If the evidence required is simply whether or not any one particular individual personally experiences racism, the result is likely to be denial. Likewise, if personal experience is the evidence for power and privilege, then this too will be denied. Power and privilege are so normalized for whites that their effects are frequently not noticed or felt (McIntosh, 1988). This situation makes it almost impossible for whites to engage in discussions about how their own lives are also shaped (elevated) by racism. As Jason, the white, heterosexual, able-bodied, upper-class male in this study states:

JASON: Can I ask a question? Well, you don't have to answer it, but—power versus privilege versus opportunity: I feel like I've had a ton of opportunity, but I don't—but, you know, an often-unemployed, leftist-leaning resident of Bellevue—I've got no power; nobody listens to me where I live.

Jason's personal self-interpretation of not having power is not necessarily aligned with how others perceive or respond to him or his relationship to social and institutional power. Understanding power as power —over someone—rather than, say, as an unearned surplus of resources and opportunities—perpetuates this misunderstanding. Further, as McIntosh (1988) argues, he may not feel much of his power because it is so normalized that it is taken for granted. The discourse of personal experience as performed by whites in this study functioned with the discourse of feeling-states. Given the ways in which dominant society socializes whites not to see, feel, or think about racism, or to perceive loss in the absence of people of color in our lives, depending on experiences to guide one's racial interpretations is highly problematic (McIntosh, 1988; Morrison, 1992; Tatum, 1997; Thandeka, 2000).

Another way in which the discourse of personal experience functions to protect whiteness is in the absolution it offers whites from responsibility for

racism. A subtext of this discourse is that we each have the right to our own experience; you cannot question my experience, and I cannot question yours. In this way, we are each responsible for our own experiences and are absolved from any communal responsibility. The subtext says, “If you have a problem with racism, it is your problem. It is not my problem because it is not my experience.” The following exchange illustrates how one white participant used this subtext to distanced herself from racial responsibility:

RICH (POC): I just think for any person—for any white person—they can't look me in the eye and then tell me they're not racist—that's crazy. And I think that a lot of what we're talking about here is that... you are trying to say that, “no, I'm not racist,” but I think when you accept the fact that you are racist, that you're—that, hell, “yeah, I'm racist”—I mean, then that's somewhat of a starting point.

COURTNEY (W): I'm not quite sure what you mean, because I don't feel that being the case in the world.

Rich has positioned racism as a collective process, one in which all whites participate. Further, he offers this perspective as a positive—a way out of the racism from which Courtney works so hard to disconnect herself. If Courtney can start from this framework, she is *less* likely to be perceived as colluding with racism. However, Courtney's response to Rich re-positions his collective analysis of racism as merely a matter of difference in opinion. She rejects his analysis, stating flatly that she does not “feel that being the case”—it isn't her experience. This move effectively makes racism Rich's personal problem. Since Courtney doesn't agree with Rich – his experience isn't her experience – she bears no responsibility for the racism he feels.

We want to explore a final problem with the discourse of personal experience: the relationship of this discourse to the social distortions that are necessary to hold the ideology of white dominance in place. White narratives that conceptualize people of color (and African American males in particular) as dangerous are a profound perversion of the historical and current direction of violence between whites and African Americans (Collins, 2000; Lorde, 2001; Morrison, 1992). If we contend that the dominant culture distorts social realities in order to hide and maintain privilege, then using the discourse of personal experience is especially problematic. Through this discourse, whites conflate social and political phenomena such as racial discomfort with questions of safety. Yet without an explication of what personal experience means in this context, there is no way to challenge this conflation. Given these distortions, personal experience is not a particularly solid reference point from which to make sense of racial interpretations.

Buffering the Privilege of Experience

In thinking about how to anticipate and respond to the effects that personal experience discourses have on conversations like the dialogues in our study, we find the concept of positioning helpful. Positioning refers to the discursive practices through which people place themselves or are placed by others. Positioning is defined as a conversational phenomenon that produces social relations (Davies & Harre, 1990). An individual emerges through the processes of social interaction, not as a fixed personality, but as one who is constituted and reconstituted through the various discursive practices in which they participate. This form of analysis views the subject as open and shifting, depending on the positions made available through their own and others' discursive practices. In a sense, this notion of positioning makes the political impersonal: as students and educators understand their most intimate and biographical narratives to be social and historical products, it becomes easier to shift the conversation from "why did you say that" to "how did you come to articulate it that way?" The former statement tends to locate both the problem and the solution in the individual; the latter in the social environment.

Bronwyn Davies and Rom Harre (1990) claim that the following processes are involved in generating one's world view and self-perception:

- Learning about categories that include some people and exclude others (for example, black, white, racist, non-racist)
- Participating in the discursive practices through which meaning is accorded to those categories (for example, one must have a concept of non-racist in order to participate in the discursive practices that generate meaning related to the category)
- Positioning oneself in relation to the categories being generated (for example, as a non-racist rather than as a racist, or viewing oneself as having the characteristics that locate oneself in one category but not in another)
- Seeing oneself as belonging to, and viewing the world from the perspective of, one's position.

To demonstrate the utility of the approach of positioning, we return to an interaction described earlier: Courtney, a white participant, has made a claim that racism is more of a "generational thing," that older white people are more racist than younger whites such as herself. Along with others, Carolyn, a woman of color, has challenged Courtney's claim. This is Courtney's response to Carolyn's challenge:

"You know, someone coming from the outside and telling a white person, well, "you really—you shouldn't feel that way," you know, it's like what does that mean? Because my feelings are not about you. You know what I mean?"

They're not about people I associate with you; they're about somebody else. So for you to tell me, it's like—it's almost meaningless in a way."

Courtney is positioning herself in several ways. First, she quite clearly positions Caroline as an outsider, both racially ("they're not about people I associate with you; they're about somebody else") and in terms of Caroline's ability to feel the same things she does ("because my feelings are not about you"). This positioning of Caroline as a racial outsider (and conversely, positioning herself as the racial insider) is particularly significant given that Courtney is referring to feelings about race while at the same time placing a woman of color outside of the play—Courtney's feelings about race have nothing to do with the racial realities of people of color ("people I associate with you"). Second, Courtney positions her own knowledge as superior to Caroline's, subordinating Caroline's knowledge to her own ("So for you to tell me"), going so far as to position any racial knowledge that Caroline has as null and void ("it's almost meaningless in a way"). In this way, she claims racial legitimacy as the sole domain of whites.

None of this is likely conscious and none is idiosyncratic to Courtney's experience. If educators frame these discussions within a theory of positioning, it opens the door to helping students (and ourselves) see white's reports of experience as part of larger historical and social processes that we inherit, not invent. Thus it becomes easier to help participants both see these positional moves as performances, and inquire about their historical and social origins. This study may be convincing because it is congruent with a great deal of scholarship, as well as many classroom interactions. But it is far from conclusive. Although the participants in our study exhibit behaviors that are typical of the social practices that produced them and that they perform, more research is needed to establish variations of experience discourse. Further research may illustrate the effects of a discourse of personal experience on conversations about racism and whether—as we suggest—an approach that draws on positioning produces more engaged and productive conversations across differences. By creating a conversational space in which everyone's racialized interpretations are open to political examination, the role of language and memory in preserving social hierarchies will be more apparent and vulnerable to destabilization. In such a setting, marginalized voices may be more easily heard and sustained, and racial perceptions expanded.

Notes

¹ Students of color self-identified as: a Native American female, a Chicano male, an African American female, an African male, and a Chinese American female.

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