

Understanding & Dismantling Privilege

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White on White: Communicating about Race and White Privilege with Critical Humility

European-American Collaborative Challenging Whiteness

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Abstract

We think of critical humility as a way of being that includes a reflective practice that can help white people develop capacity to interrupt white privilege effectively. We describe the experiential sessions that we facilitated as all-day institutes at the White Privilege Conference (WPC) beginning in 2008 and continuing to the upcoming conference in 2012. The purpose of our experiential institute is to give white people an opportunity to learn about critical humility. The purpose of this paper is to provide enough information about each experiential activity in the institute so that others can use our work for their own purposes.

About the Authors

The European-American Collaborative Challenging Whiteness (ECCW) fosters research and learning about the subject of racism and white privilege. The use of collective authorship under the name of the Collaborative reflects our understanding of the way in which knowledge is constructed. Members came together originally through our association with a cultural consciousness project at the California Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco; members are: Carole Barlas, Elizabeth Kasl, Alec MacLeod, Doug Paxton, Penny Rosenwasser and Linda Sartor. Inquiries about the Collaborative's work can be addressed to any member via email: collaborative@eccw.org. Find further information at our website: <http://www.iconoclastic.net/eccw/>

In this article, we describe the experiential sessions that we facilitated as all-day institutes at the White Privilege Conference (WPC) beginning in 2008 and continuing to the upcoming institute in 2012. We include both our materials and our rationale for the design so that others can use our work. The purpose of our experiential institute is to give white people an opportunity to learn about a practice we call critical humility. We think of critical humility as a way of being that includes a reflective practice that can help us develop capacity to interrupt white privilege effectively.

Our group of six white practitioners has journeyed together for more than a decade, meeting monthly and helping each other learn from our experiences as white people working toward institutional and individual change. All members are active in multicultural and multiracial contexts as well. For our WPC Institute, we designed activities that are based upon these experiences.

One of our most important ways of learning grows from our practice of sharing painful personal experiences in communicating about race and privilege. Members ask questions and probe for information; feedback from others often helps us discover things about ourselves or about the situation that we had not attended to at the time. Through our efforts to untangle the root causes of difficulty in our own conversations, our group gradually developed knowledge that each of us uses as we go about our daily living. We identified a way of being that helps us be more effective in our interactions with other white people about race, racism and white privilege. We call this way of being critical humility. After coming up with the concept of critical humility, we started noticing what gets in the way of critical humility and

compiled a list of questions that help us reflect about our own motives and behaviors.

We begin this chapter by explaining what we mean by critical humility and then describe the institute design that gives participants an opportunity to try out this practice for themselves.

Critical Humility as a Habit of Being

In examining our own experience as well-intentioned white people trying to confront racism in individuals and institutions, we began to notice our need to be, and to be perceived as being, “good white people.” We noticed that our perception of superiority over other white people who just “don’t get it” gets in our way of engaging with them and often causes them to withdraw or become defensive. Additionally, when we believe that we already know how to be good white allies, we are less open to new learning. Too often, we are blind to how we continue to benefit from white privilege and to how we are similar to people to whom we feel superior, especially in our denial of privilege. We understand these feelings of superiority to be a core component of white privilege.

From these observations about how we often sabotage our desire to be effective change agents with other white people, we developed a vision of critical humility, which we think of as a way of being that guides our practice when we interact with others. *We define critical humility as the practice of remaining open to the fact that our knowledge is partial and evolving while at the same time being committed to speaking up and taking action in the world based on our current knowledge, however imperfect.* The two parts of this definition capture a paradox. If we are to hold ourselves accountable for acting, we must

have confidence that our knowledge is valid enough to shape actions that are appropriate. At the same time, we must stay consciously aware that our knowledge is distorted by hegemony and possible self-deception.

In other words, we strive toward being a “good white person” while trying not to fall into the trap of thinking we actually have become that person.

I. Self-identity and Values:

- What are all of the self-identities that might be operating and at risk in this situation? (e.g., competent teacher, understanding parent, “good” person, anti-racist ally, etc.) Are there competing or contradicting values or identities involved?
- Where do I feel threatened? What am I scared about?
- What attracts me in this situation?
- What is the identity label I seek to avoid? How do I see myself as different from others in this situation?
- What are the costs and benefits of changing self-identity? How are these costs related to feelings of self-worth?

II. Role of Privilege:

- What is the privilege operating in the situation? Acknowledging that we all have multiple identities, which ones are salient here?
- In what ways am I resisting perceiving myself in a dominant position?
- Is the context indifferent to my identity? Does it reinforce or reject my identity?

III. Purpose:

- What is the phenomenon I wish to change?
- To what extent is my purpose aligning with or threatening my self-identity(ies)?
- How might I be perpetuating the phenomenon I wish to change in this situation?

IV. Self-Reflective Process:

- To what extent have I disclosed myself, allowed myself to be vulnerable to new learning?
- How am I similar to that which I am criticizing?
- Can I catch a glimpse of what I didn't know that I didn't know?
- Do I truly believe that I don't hold all of the answers? How is my information incomplete?
- How patient am I with myself about being wrong? How compassionate?

Figure 1. Questions to assist in developing a practice of critical humility

As we endeavor to practice critical humility, we become more aware of those personal thoughts and behaviors that not only impede dialogue but also may embody the very phenomenon that we wish to challenge, such as supremacist thinking. We distilled our expanding awareness into questions that help us more readily discover factors that are interfering with our effectiveness in engaging others about race and privilege (European American Collaborative Challenging Whiteness, 2005, 2007, 2010). The questions, which we have sorted into four categories, appear in Figure 1. Typically, we use these questions for reflection *on* action, either prospectively or retrospectively, although we strive to be able to use them in the very moment of difficult interactions, as a guide for reflection-*in*-action.¹

Our Institute Design

As adult educators we are influenced by an extensive body of ideas about the importance of learning from experience (Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner, 2007, pp. 159-186). For learning to be both meaningful and sustainable, it must be connected to the learner's personal life-world. Although there are many different models about how to facilitate learning from experience, we are drawn most often to John Heron's theory about how to integrate multiple ways of knowing (Heron, 1992).

Heron identifies four ways of knowing that are distinctly different from each other, and also interrelated. These are: direct experience, intuitive and imaginal expression, conceptualization and critical analysis, and practical application. Heron describes how meaningful learning begins

with a person's direct experience, which is the site of emotional responses to the world. Experiential knowing is a pre-linguistic way of knowing that cannot be communicated through words, either to self or others. People can come closer to communicating the quality of their direct experience by using intuitive and imaginal expression, such as visual or dramatic arts, dance, music, metaphor or story. These expressive ways of knowing help a person discern patterns so that he or she can more readily take the next step of learning from experience—conceptualizing and analyzing what has been experienced. With analysis linked to emotional experience, the person is now ready for practical application and putting new knowledge into action.

As we want our institute to foster meaningful learning about how white people can more effectively talk with others about privilege and racism, we want to arouse emotions associated with the participants' direct experience of making this effort. At the same time, learning emotionally in such a short period of time can be a challenge. Our strategy is to lead up to direct experience by organizing our institute's activities into a series of encounters with experiences of difficult conversations, each increasingly direct. These encounters are: remembering a personal experience with a difficult conversation, watching someone else engage in a difficult conversation, and engaging directly in a difficult conversation.

We now summarize each section of activity for our institute, which is designed ultimately to help participants learn how to communicate more effectively about race, racism and privilege, using a practice we call critical humility. Along with each section of the institute activity, we provide scripts and instructions so that others can try out these activities in their own practices.

¹ We credit our use of the terms reflection-on-action and reflection-in-action to Donald Schön (1987).

We comment on our rationale for designing activities as we have and point out the role played by the different ways of knowing.

Remembering a Difficult Conversation

After some introductory activities in which we invite participants to tell us and each other why they chose this institute, we begin

the experiential learning process by using guided imagery to help people remember and re-live a personal experience of a difficult conversation with which they felt dissatisfied (See Figure 2).

Our goal is to help participants re-experience emotions connected with a difficult conversation about race, racism or privilege.

Speak slowly and distinctly; do your best to sense the responses in the room and adjust your pace accordingly.

This is an important step in the experiential learning process. The purpose is to connect what we're learning/doing here today with a real situation in your life. We will be returning to this same situation later when trying to apply critical humility. [pause]

Get into a comfortable seated position, feet flat on the floor, close your eyes if you are comfortable doing so, so that you can focus within yourself. If not closed eyes, soften your gaze so that you are not focused on anything outside yourself. [pause]

Let come into your awareness a time when you were engaging with a white person about race, racism, or white privilege and your communication or lack of communication did not go as well as you would have liked. It may have been a conversation in which you responded and the other person got defensive, or a time when you didn't say anything and wished later that you had said something. This could be at work, or while having a meal, or while you were on vacation. It could be with family or with a neighbor, or while out on a date, or in a classroom.

[Long pause]... If a memory hasn't come, just let yourself imagine being in such a situation. Make up a hypothetical scene.

Think about how the situation arose [pause]...

Now re-enter the experience. Get in touch with as many aspects of the experience as possible. [pause]

What is being said or not said...? [pause]

What are you thinking...? [pause]

What are you noticing outside yourself—sites..., sounds..., smells..., textures..., tastes (if it was over a meal)...? [pause]

What are you feeling inside...? [pause] How does it feel in your body? [pause] Where does it show up? [pause] Where might you be feeling tension...?

[Long pause]... Now, I'm going to ask you to gently bring your attention back into this room, but stay with your feelings. Open your eyes when you are ready.

Figure 2. Guided Visualization Used to Help Participants Remember and Re-live an Emotional Experience with a Difficult Conversation about Race, Racism, or Privilege

Following the visualization, we instruct participants to draw a picture with paper and crayons that we place under their seats before the session begins. Emphasizing that the quality of the picture as an artistic product is not the point, we ask participants to work in silence and try to depict their emotional responses to the conversation they just re-created during the visualization. Drawing a picture in silence is intended to help participants use an imaginal/intuitive way of knowing to strengthen their connection to the felt experience.

We then have participants work in groups of three to share their stories about their remembered experiences. This first sharing is designed to elicit feelings, because those feelings may contribute to what interfered with the communication having a satisfying result. Participants use their pictures to help them represent their experiences to their dialogue partners, who often find that the quality of emotions is communicated as much by the pictures as by the person's words. Next, the members of each trio move into a critical analysis activity (engaging in the conceptual way of knowing) in which participants try to elicit from each other what may have interfered with the communication in each situation.

We come back together in the large group, where we focus on the participants' critical analyses of what may have contributed to their failed communications. We remind participants that we will come back to these dialogue groups and their stories at the end of the day. For the moment, we ask for a few people to share if they are able to identify something in themselves that interfered with the communication. We ask them to try to do this without getting too much into their stories or solutions. Having participants re-live their own experiences and then reflect

on the part they played in creating the outcome is intended to provide a meaningful foundation on which to build our concept of critical humility as we move forward through the rest of the day.

Witnessing a Difficult Conversation: An Example of Critical Humility in Action

We then perform a skit that gives participants an opportunity to listen in on a difficult conversation in which we demonstrate some of our ideas about critical humility. In this skit, we show two white professors, Ann and Victoria, engaging in a conversation about a student of color. Although she might not use these words, Ann is a good example of a person who perceives herself to be a "good white person." In the conversation captured in the script, Ann's sense of superiority quickly puts Victoria on the defensive. When Ann catches herself, she is able to reflect-in-action with critical humility. As she redirects her unproductive approach to Victoria, the tension de-escalates and Victoria becomes open to learning about how she represents white hegemony.

The Script: Victoria and Ann Have a Difficult Conversation

The following conversation takes place between two faculty colleagues in a program in Educational Leadership. Victoria is a cognitive psychologist who teaches courses in adult learning; Ann is a philosopher who teaches both philosophy and ethics courses. Students in the program are working professionals from a variety of educational enterprises, such as community college teachers and administrators, directors of continuing education for health care workers, corporate trainers, and community-based social activists. Victoria and Ann find themselves alone in the departmental office.

Two performers play the roles of Victoria and Ann. Two others play the roles of the “Silent Thoughts” (ST) that Victoria and Ann have during the conversation. The Silent Thought performers stand behind their characters. When the Silent Thoughts are speaking, the Victoria and Ann performers freeze.

[V’s ST. I am so frustrated with trying to deal with LeRoy Jones. Ann is pretty savvy; she’ll give me some support.]

V. Do you know who LeRoy Jones is? Have you had him in any of your courses?

[A’s ST. Who doesn’t know LeRoy? He is one of only two African-American students in the whole program. You would have to be blind not to notice him...]

A. Yes, he was in my philosophy course last semester. Why?

[V’s ST. There’s no way he has the ability to do the program. I’m sure Ann saw that too.]

V. I am very concerned about his ability to do the program. What do you think of him as a student?

[A’s ST. Oooh no. So that’s where this is headed... Wouldn’t you know it. The one black man in her class and she thinks that he is no good. I

hate having to deal with people like Victoria.]

A. Hmmmm. As I recall, his final paper was interesting. I can’t remember now the exact details about why I thought that. Tell me what happened in your course.

V. He’s in my course on adult learning. I have a two-step process for term papers. Students turn in a first draft and then we have a telephone conference about the paper so that the student can improve the paper for a final draft.

[V’s ST. I am proud of my process for term papers. It’s takes a lot of time, but I don’t mind. I think the process shows how much I care about students’ growth. But this guy is hopeless. I don’t see how I will be able to help him.]

I was a bit dismayed when I read LeRoy’s first draft of his paper on cognitive development. The paper assignment is a comparison of theories by Perry, Kohlberg, and Kegan. I thought LeRoy’s paper was so garbled, I wasn’t sure how to begin talking to him.

[V’s ST. What he was saying was so irrelevant. I cannot understand how he got admitted into our program.]

Anyway, I did the best I could. I started our conversation by talking about his first mistake in interpretation. Instead of

responding to me about the point I was making, LeRoy attacked me and started talking about how the course was culturally narrow. He said that Perry and Kohlberg and Kegan were all white men and that their views on cognitive development were quite specific to white men. He said that he felt his experience as an African American man was not represented in what I was teaching in the course. I was really taken aback. Frankly, when it comes to LeRoy being able to do the work, I think it's hopeless. I can't believe he was admitted into our program.

[A's ST. Sounds to me like LeRoy is right on target, but she just doesn't get it. I am weary just thinking about her ignorance.]

A. What did you say?

V. I told him that these were *the* three most important theorists in the field. That you really couldn't understand anything in the field until you understood the basics.

[A's ST. This is so typical. A white person knowing only what white people have written. She doesn't look beyond what she already knows. I've worked really hard to make my syllabus multicultural.]

A. That can't be true. That these three men are the only important theorists in the field?

[V's ST. Who does she think she is? This is my field. I guess I should know what's important]

V. I didn't say they were the *only* theorists. Just the most important ones, the starting point for every thing.

[A's ST. Whoa! Slow down a bit. Try to connect. I can't teach her anything if I make her so defensive.]

A. I may not know about your field, but I know that I have discovered lots of important scholars that weren't considered important by my professors when I was in school. I think it is important to have diverse voices in my syllabus and I include people like W.E.B. DuBois, Alain Locke, Booker T. Washington, Mary McLeod Bethune, Marva Collins, bell hooks. I'm just suggesting that I thought the same approach might work for you.

[V's ST. This is so frustrating. I can't stand all the political correctness. I thought Ann would understand, but she sounds just like LeRoy. And there wasn't any point talking to him. No matter how hard I tried to explain, he just didn't get it.]

V. Maybe it's different when the field is scientific, like cognitive psychology. You know, Ann, I've done quite a bit of publishing myself in the field. These three theorists produced the seminal works. Everything else is based on their work. Maybe in a field like philosophy, it's different. You're not dealing with objective facts.

[V's ST. Oh.]

[A's ST. Good grief! That does it! I cannot believe she is so dim that she thinks psychology is a science tracking objective facts. I don't want to waste any more of my time. Get me out of here. How could they have hired this person for our program? She thinks *he* shouldn't be in the program, well I think *she*

[Big Pause...] Oh! Look at me. I'm doing to Victoria exactly what she did to LeRoy. She thinks he doesn't understand the basics about being a student. I think she doesn't understand the basics about a lot of things. How different are we? She felt superior to him. I feel superior to her. Maybe I'm not really listening to her. I wonder what I can say that she could hear.

Come on, Ann, you know you should try staying in an inquiry mode when you get into this kind of disagreement. Ask yourself questions about how you are participating in the very dynamic you find offensive in Victoria. That's a lot easier said than done. Slow down. Figure out what I don't really know and respond to what matters to her.]

A. [Takes a deep breath] You know, Victoria, you're right. I don't know anything about your field. Can we back up a little bit? Maybe start over? Tell me what it is about cognitive development theory that you think is important for someone like me, or like LeRoy, to know.

V. (starts out slowly, tentatively) I think these theories really help people see why they have trouble understanding each other. Especially when they are at different stages of development. The theories show how people make different assumptions about what is true, or what is valuable, and then talk past each other. If you're a teacher, the theories can help you understand and track students' learning.

[A's ST. Talking past each other? Like the two of us right now? Okay, now I really am curious about how some of these theories might help both Victoria and me, as we work with our students.

A. So these ideas could help me as I engage with my students? And I get that you care a lot about this stuff. Why are you so upset that LeRoy is challenging these guys?

[V's ST. Am I upset about that? Maybe I am...]

V. I want all my students to go out and be successful in the world. We need excellence in educators now more than ever.

[A's ST. Hmm, that is something I can relate to, even if we might go about getting there differently.]

A: And I hear your passion. You really care about having LeRoy be successful.

[V's ST: as if he could.]

V. I just don't think he can do it

A. Why not? Just because he is questioning you? I bet there has been a time or two when you found your old—male—professors were less than aware of what it was like for you.

V. You know that's true. But, as a woman entering academia, I knew I had to know these basics inside and out, or people would dismiss me. I worked hard to overcome my barriers and be taken seriously. It wasn't easy being a woman professor when I started...

A. So, no surprise there: you had to be better than the men, just to be even. That sounds hard. So, come on, didn't anyone in the field of adult development critique these white guys? This being academia, there must be controversy of some kind. How do women respond to their development theories?

V. Actually, there are women who have done research about how the theories aren't a good fit for women's cognitive development. People like Carol Gilligan and the authors of *Women's Ways of Knowing*.

[V's ST: I have these people on my syllabus as optional reading. Maybe

if I changed the paper assignment to include their work too...]

A. Do you think it is possible that the same situation might apply to people of color? Has anyone written about that?

[V's ST: Well, I am sure I would know if anyone had, (pause) wouldn't I?]

V. Actually, I don't really know. So you think LeRoy might actually have a point? I guess I need to find out...

Analysis of How Ann Reflects-in-Action and Shifts the Conversation

Early in the conversation, Ann makes a judgment about Victoria's ignorance as a white person. Her silent thoughts conclude, "I hate having to deal with people like Victoria." Even when Ann admonishes herself to "connect" with Victoria she stays in a mindset of superiority from which she wants to "teach" Victoria ("I can't teach her anything if I make her so defensive"). Ann presents herself as a model when she proudly points to the authors of color who are included in her syllabus. As she and Victoria hit the impasse that is inevitable, Ann is ready to give up in disgust. Her silent thoughts are,

Good grief! That does it! I cannot believe she is so dim.... I don't want to waste any more of my time. Get me out of here. How could they have hired this person for our program? She thinks *he* shouldn't be in the program, well I think *she*

Ann stops herself in mid-thought and becomes critically reflective about how her interaction with Victoria is counter-productive. In reference to the guiding questions from Figure 1, she is asking herself, “How am I similar to that which I am criticizing?”

[Big Pause...] Oh! Look at me. I’m doing to Victoria exactly what she did to LeRoy. She thinks he doesn’t understand the basics about being a student. I think she doesn’t understand the basics about a lot of things. How different are we? She felt superior to him. I feel superior to her. I wonder what I can say that she could hear. Maybe I’m not really listening to her.

Come on, Ann, you know you should try staying in an inquiry mode when you get into this kind of disagreement. Ask yourself questions about how you are participating in the very dynamic you find offensive in Victoria. That’s a lot easier said than done. Slow down. Figure out what I don’t really know and respond to what matters to her.]

If Ann were to use the questions in Figure 1 to help her understand the conversation, she might discover that one of the identities she has at stake is her desire to be seen as a white teacher who is culturally competent. She might also discover that in her zeal to show off her own cultural competence she implicitly discounts Victoria as essentially incompetent. When Ann shifts the conversation to focus on what she might be able to learn from Victoria,

there is a new opening for learning for both of them.

Leaving the Morning Session with Readiness to Engage

Thus, we spend the morning clarifying the concept of critical humility as well as the way the questions in Figure 1 can help us reflect critically on our attitudes and behaviors. We draw participants in with the skit, which they find humorous in its honesty. One participant observed that the skit “was a great model and made the activity of actually trying less self-conscious.” Participants often see themselves in our skit and since they probably chose to attend this workshop because they want to find ways to get past that sticky place in their conversations, they are motivated to participate fully in the next part of the day.

Direct Experience with Engaging in a Difficult Conversation

Having remembered a personal difficult conversation and having witnessed the skit, participants are now ready to have a direct experience. We use a process called simultaneous role play to structure an activity that serves the whole group as a common point of departure for further learning.

What Is Simultaneous Role Play and What Are Its Benefits?

In simultaneous role play, participants in a large learning group divide into small groups to play out a challenging interaction. Each small group has the same instructions and plays out the same situation at the same time. There is no audience, just small groups doing the role play simultaneously.

Simultaneous role play has important advantages over the more common approach to role play in which one group plays the situation and everyone else watches. First, since there is no audience, the simultaneous role play process reduces performance anxiety. Second, everyone gets involved and therefore has a chance to connect to the situation emotionally, which greatly enhances learning. Such embodied engagement gives learners a strong multi-sensory experience that intensifies and solidifies the learning that take places, making the new learning more accessible in future situations.

In simultaneous role play, everyone has some basic information about the situation, but only the person who plays a particular role has information about that individual character. The success of simultaneous role play depends on providing participants with enough information about a character's beliefs and values so that they can enter into a character's point of view.

Who are the Characters in Our Role Play?

In the workshop, participants receive only their character's profile, but no information about other characters. The information that participants receive about an individual character appears in Appendix I.

We have created the characters in our role play to represent different points of view that are typical of white people who care about racial equality and social justice. We model these points of view after Ruth Frankenberg's analysis of attitudes held by white women in her study of white women's perceptions about their relationships with people of color (Frankenberg, 1993). As we do not anticipate having participants in the workshop who represent what Frankenberg calls *essentialist racism*, we craft the character descriptions to be representative of the other positions that Frankenberg

describes. The character Alex represents our classic well-intentioned "good white person." Chris is what Frankenberg might call the "power-evasive" white person. Casey fits within Frankenberg's "Race Cognizance, Rethinking Race," the second highest layer of consciousness, Race Cognizance without Courage. Drew is the "color-blind" consciousness.²

The situation in the simultaneous role play is a conversation among white friends that can be expected to elicit differences in their understanding of race, racism, and privilege. Before we divide into groups, we offer a specific opportunity for people who identify as persons of color or as mixed race. When we used this exercise the first time, at NCORE (National Conference for Race and Ethnicity in Higher Education) in 2007, we divided into groups by simply counting off, thus casting several persons of color in the role of one of the white friends. After the workshop, people of color observed that playing the role of a white person was quite challenging, even painful and may have influenced the dynamic of the conversation; they recommended that we set up the exercise so that people of color are not cast as white. Acting on their advice, we now invite anyone who self-identifies as a person of color or of mixed race to volunteer for the role of Bailey whose race is not specified. Our descriptions for each of the characters we use in our Institute role play are reproduced in Appendix I.

Entering into a Character's Point of View

One of the most important activities in simultaneous role play is the "same

² We continually update our material. Since this article was written, we have changed the characters in the role play. For our most up-to-date version of materials, see our website at www.eccw.org.

character caucus”—a procedure designed to help participants play their roles authentically. This procedure addresses a challenge that often diminishes the effective use of role plays—participants sometimes act like themselves instead of inhabiting the beliefs and values of the character they are supposed to be playing.

All the people who play the same role come together to discuss their character. Based on the information that appears in Appendix I, participants imagine together what their character is feeling and thinking and what kinds of arguments their character would be likely to use as the conversation unfolds. A participant in 2008 suggested that we “Give some specific questions to address when caucusing about the roles—this helps focus the conversation.” For 2009 we developed the questions that are included in Appendix I, to help participants explore how to take on that character’s attitudes and likely approaches to the challenging interaction.

Getting a chance to talk about one’s character with others who will be playing the same character helps to overcome resistances and avoid caricature. Participants frequently observe that the opportunity to caucus with their character groups is important and is itself effective as an opportunity to learn about their own attitudes and behaviors.

Conducting the Role Play

After participants have had enough time to “become” their characters, they are directed into the groups in which they play out the situation with the other characters. We provide a short script that establishes the situation with a few opening lines of dialogue. The most important part of simultaneous role play is the description of the characters. The particular situation, and opening script, can be easily changed to

make the situation timely. For example, in our 2008 institute, we created a situation in which white friends share their response to the aftermath of Katrina. In 2009 white friends talk about what the election of Barack Obama means regarding racism in the country. Subsequent scripts have been based on Haiti and the devastation of the earthquake that occurred there, health care legislation, and the Occupy Wall Street Movement. The script for our 2010 institute appears in Appendix II.

Once in role play groups, players begin their conversation by reading the script and then, doing their best to stay in character, they continue the conversation. After about fifteen minutes we stop the role play and debrief the experience in the small role play groups. During this debriefing, everyone stays in character.

We have learned that engaging in the role play is so emotionally absorbing that participants need assistance in making the transition from their role-play characters back to themselves. When the debriefing in character is complete, we perform a small ritual in which all step out of, and shake off their characters so that they can participate in the remainder of the day from their own perspectives. Still in the role play groups but now as themselves, participants attempt to identify factors that might have contributed to the conversation going astray. Then participants apply the critical humility guiding questions (see Figure 1). Participants think about their own characters and talk as a group about each character. The goal is to uncover insights promoted by using the questions.

Because participants are discussing characters in a role play, they do not have to reveal their own personal traits or weaknesses. This minimizes defensiveness and resistance. With its focus outside oneself, the discussion allows participants to

see that they are not alone in the challenges they face.

In our evaluation form, we ask participants to describe what they found most useful or enjoyed most about our institute. The majority of participants refer to the role play activity, often saying, “I loved the role play.” They describe this part of the day as “fantastic,” “effective,” “powerful,” and “meaningful.” One participant who played the part of Drew said, “It was interesting seeing all the parts of myself play out in front of me.” Another noticed how the activity helped her grasp emotionally something about herself that she had heretofore understood primarily at an intellectual level.

It linked the personal and professional. It was a welcoming and safe environment that let me be vulnerable enough to do the next step of growth I’ve so been longing to do—to look at my inner “Alex” and find ways—*feel* my way to ways—to act with more curiosity and openness and compassion and humility. It’s where I know I wanted to go but this experiential workshop helped me move there more than intellectually.

Having recognized themselves in the role play characters, participants are now ready to make the transition to looking at themselves and identifying the parts they play in their own personal experiences with difficult conversations. Our next activity affords this opportunity.

Applying Critical Humility to the Remembered Difficult Conversation

Back in the whole group, we remind the participants that critical humility is a way of being, not the process of answering the questions in Figure 1. Those questions can

help us reflect on what interferes with our capacity to think, feel and act from the way of being that we call critical humility. To bring the participants back to their personal experience, we ask them to return to their small groups from the morning session in which they shared their real-life difficult conversations; in these groups, they now use the questions to gain insight about factors that contributed to the conversation’s difficulty and to speculate about how the conversations might have been affected if they had practiced critical humility.

One woman spoke about the very painful experience she had used as the focal point in her participation. “This session has been helpful, a powerful learning experience. The Critical Humility questions are powerful. I think I may finally be able to lay to rest my experience from 15 years ago. If I had these questions then, it would have been a different conversation.”

Summary: Sharing Our Experience of Learning from Experience

In translating our own experience to our institute design, we want to give participants a taste of what it is like to use the questions that have helped us try to live a way of being we call critical humility. We focus on using difficult conversations as a starting point for learning. First, we ask our participants to remember a difficult conversation from their own past. Second, we demonstrate a difficult conversation that one of us had and show how the questions can provide insight about ineffective behavior. Then we invite everyone into a shared experience of a difficult conversation by taking on prescribed roles of white people whose values and beliefs interfere with effective interaction among friends. After experiencing the conversation, participants use the questions to analyze the characters’ contributions to difficulty in the

conversation. Finally, we ask participants to use the questions to look at themselves. Having started the institute by helping participants re-connect emotionally with a personal experience, we end the day by having participants look anew at that experience, using what they learned about critical humility and the factors that often prevent us from practicing it.

We do not expect that participants walk away from our institutes as full-blown inhabitants of a way of being called critical humility. We don't see ourselves that way, either now or in the future. What we hope to accomplish is to share a vision of critical humility as a worthy goal and to help participants learn how they might shepherd their own journey toward that goal. One woman said, "I was able to open up the process of self reflection and acknowledgement, which I plan to draw on during the conference." Another observed, "The discussions were rich and very helpful."

It is important to acknowledge that our participants are a self-select group from a particular population: those who have chosen not only to attend the WPC but also to invest additional time in an institute that is specifically described as Intermediate to Advanced. We cannot know whether less prepared or willing participants would have similar experiences.

We also wish to note that while this institute is specifically designed to help white people talk to other white people about issues of racism and privilege, we have been able to effectively welcome the presence and contribution of people of color who are willing to come into such an environment. One of the people of color who came to an institute described the experience this way:

I wasn't sure if this would be open to people of color and was worried when I walked in and saw so few. I was relieved to experience your thoughtfulness in planning to include the people of color in the session and much appreciated the depth your planning brought!

As adult educators who believe that people learn most meaningfully when they build their learning on personal experience, we follow a cycle of activities that mixes Heron's four ways of knowing: direct experience, intuitive and imaginal expression, analysis of meaning derived from experience, and practical application of new insights. Our overall goal in the institutes is to help participants have an experience similar to our own: of being on a journey while staying aware that the journey is never-ending. We keep striving to be increasingly conscious of how privilege affects our world and to be more effective as white people acting for racial justice.

Notes

We contribute this article in the spirit of helping others understand some of what we have learned as white people working together on the issues of race and difference. We encourage you to utilize our ideas and our materials in service of increased understanding, social justice and human flourishing.

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Appendix I. Characters for Role Play.

Alex: You were raised in an upper-middle class family. In the past you have felt a great deal of guilt and shame about the privilege accorded to skin color and you have made a commitment to name racism whenever you recognize it. You are a passionate person who has worked hard to fight for justice. You feel that a good ally in race relations should support people of color. You are distressed to see people of color people have faced poverty and injustice for so many centuries. You feel strongly that this injustice should be addressed. You are an activist who at times can be exasperated at the apparent lack of sophistication of your friends and feel it is vital and urgent to speak up and work towards change on a daily basis.

Questions to consider in playing the role of Alex:

- What do I hope others admire about me?
- How might I respond when challenged or questioned?
- What do I mean when I say, “I’ve done my work”?
- How patient am I with myself about being wrong?
- And how do I feel about white people I think are wrong?

Chris: You grew up in a working class family, whose grandparents were immigrants and came to the US with only the clothes on their backs. Everyone in your family worked hard for the success you have earned. You don’t feel as though your family had privileges when you were growing up. You don’t feel that many of your friends actually understand how tough things were for your family. You resent it when they lump you together with people who are better off than you just because you all have the same skin color. Even though it’s frustrating you keep trying to help others understand the way you see things.

Questions to consider in playing the role of Chris:

- What do I hope others admire about me?
- How do I see myself as different from the others in this situation?
- What do I imagine the costs and benefits to be of claiming my central identity as “working class”?
- In what ways might I be resisting seeing myself in a dominant position?

Casey: You grew up in the Midwest in a town with very little racial diversity. In spite of that background, you are quite sensitive to injustice, and have some awareness of your privilege in American society. You are a friend of the others and tend to avoid conflict. These conversations about race make you nervous, and you tend to withdraw. You recognize how racial privilege shapes your life and understand the impacts of institutional racism. However when the conversation turns to race, you feel befuddled and confused because you know that there is still much that you don't know and are afraid that you will say the wrong thing. You are also aware of the dilemma of having such a dialogue with most white people, who quickly get defensive and angry when confronted with evidence of their own racism. You are wondering how to step up to be a better ally for people of color. You have recently decided that you must speak up about your views.

Questions to consider in playing the role of Casey:

- What do I hope others admire about me?
- What do I fear that people might be thinking about me?
- How might I respond when challenged or questioned?
- How patient am I with myself about being wrong?
- And how do I feel about white people I think are wrong?

Drew: You were raised in a predominantly white suburb outside a major US city. Your family wasn't considered "rich" though, looking back, you always had most of what you needed. You attended public schools that were also predominantly white. You were taught to treat everyone the same, regardless of skin color, and you are proud of these values that you learned at home. It really wouldn't matter to you if people were "pink, blue or polka-dotted." You have had friends with people of different races in college and have had experiences of feeling connected to people from a variety of cultures and countries. You see everyone as "one" and think that if everyone saw the world this way they could learn to get along. You advocate strongly for this point of view whenever the opportunity arises.

Questions to consider in playing the role of Drew:

- What do I hope others admire about me?
- Am I comfortable acknowledging my own privilege?
- Why do I feel uncomfortable when the subject turns to race?
- What would the risk be of taking a stand?
- Have I considered that by not disclosing myself I might be limiting my learning?

Bailey (of unspecified race, specifically designed for a person of color): You do not know the people in the group who have asked if they can sit in the empty chairs at your table because the café is so crowded that there are no empty tables. As you overhear their conversation, you may have opinions about what they are saying. You might be offended by or supportive of any or all of the positions taken or have an entirely different perspective altogether. You must decide whether and how to share your perspective with these three or four strangers.

Questions to consider in playing the role of Bailey:

- What do I hope others admire about me?
- How do I feel about these white people asking to sit at my table?
- How will I take care of myself during the role play?

Appendix II. Script for Role Play

Directions: Several white friends have decided to meet one morning at a crowded café for coffee and conversation shortly after President Obama's election.

- ⇒ *Groups with Bailey:* Bailey is sitting at a table with four empty seats. Since the café is crowded, the four friends ask Bailey if they can sit at the table and Bailey agrees to share it with them. Bailey is deeply engrossed with writing in a personal journal.
- ⇒ *Groups without Bailey:* You can assume that you just sit at an empty table in the café

Remember, this is a group of *friends*. Each considers her/himself to be non-racist.

The group sits down, and Bailey might be sitting at the table already. On the table is the *Wall Street Journal*, with a headline talking about how the aid and medical care for Haiti has been ineffective in addressing the greatest needs of the population.

First three lines of dialogue in your conversation:

Chris: Given the healthcare crisis in this country, I'll be glad when we can start paying more attention to our own poor people. This disaster in Haiti seems to never end.

Alex: How can you possibly say that? Have you heard anything about what their living conditions are like, even months after the earthquake? I am going to Haiti next month to help!

Casey: It seems good that we are able to help out the Haitians...