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Exploring the Cycle of Oppression and Whiteness in the Academy through Currere: Reflections from a Reading-Group-Based Intergroup Dialogue

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Intergroup dialogue is one of the andragogical strategies used to mediate differences in cultural realities and perspectives among variable cultural groups (Zúñiga, Nagda, Chesler, Cytron-Walker, 2007). The dialogue consists of an exploration of a given topic using knowledge from scholarly resources, shared individual experiences and perspectives, and queries for clarification and understanding. Facilitators of discussions on race, white privilege, and institutional racism often utilize intergroup dialogue. This work describes such an experience.

At the beginning of fall 2018, faculty, staff, and students, at a predominantly white midwestern university, embarked upon a reading group, using Robin DiAngelo's (2016) *What Does it Mean to Be White? Developing White Racial Literacy*. The authors represent a subset of those participating in two separate reading groups. A synergy emerged as the discussion of the book was interwoven with cultural identity awareness activities and the sharing of perspectives on key themes. This article describes this year-long journey autobiographical inquiry by the authors who participated.

METHOD

In order to better understand our experience, we chose *currere*, a method of curriculum inquiry which employs critical reflection and autobiographical inquiry to investigate and make meaning of one's own lived curriculum within social, political, and educational structures (Grumet, 1976) and determines how to move forward with this new understanding (Pinar, 2004). *Currere* is often described as a four-phase process: the 'regressive' phase in which one returns to the past and relives the experience by "observ[ing]

oneself in the past" (Pinar, 1975) to develop an internal dialogue with the former self (Baszile, 2017); the 'progressive' wherein one imagines future possibilities; the 'analytic' in which one reconciles past experiences and future possibilities; and, the 'synthetic' wherein one determines how new understandings will be lived and expressed. While described linearly above, *currere* itself is not necessarily a linear process because the process of *currere* is dynamic and the phases themselves may become inextricably interwoven. This is especially true given the nature of this three-way *currere*, in which the authors embarked on their individual *currere* journey and came together to share and reflect, creating a collective point of understanding. While *currere* often is an individual journey, recent articles showcase the potential of duo-*currere* (i.e., Porter & Gallagher, 2017; Wallace & Byers, 2018), which we have adapted for three authors—i.e., trio-*currere*. To distinguish between our voices, we have noted Rogers, Cain, and Messineo.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK – THE CYCLE OF OPPRESSION

An overarching theme emerged in the authors' reflections: the relevance of the cycle of oppression within our own experiences. In the book, DiAngelo (2016) presents her version of this cycle graphically and textually. The authors were unable to locate the originator of the concept as it is widely used and adapted, but found earlier variations by social justice scholars, including the cycle of socialization (Harro, 2000a, p. 15). Harro posits that we are all born into a culture of institutional oppression with the institutional sanctions to maintain the status quo. Depending upon which side of the cultural divide we are, the result is unearned privilege (McIntosh, 1990) or unearned institutional oppression. Harro (2000b) subsequently developed the cycle of liberation to describe the mental, physical, and psychological

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processes and actions leading to efforts of systemic change. She refers to this process as critical transformation, which is the impetus that is needed to move beyond indifference or acceptance of the status quo to active participation in social action/justice (Harro, 2000b).

DiAngelo's version of the cycle includes: the generation of misinformation, social acceptance of the mistreatment of the minoritized group, internalized oppression, internalized dominance, perpetuation and enforcement by institutions, justification for further mistreatment. The result of this cycle is systematic mistreatment of a minoritized group. We came to learn about how each of our colleagues experienced the cycle in their daily lives. Three themes from the cycle emerged from our reflection and analysis: *internalized oppression, internalized dominance, perpetuation and enforcement by institution*s.

Internalized oppression is the perception that the norms, customs, characteristics typically attributed to the majority culture are of higher value and should be emulated instead of those of your minoritized culture (Brookfield, 2019; Jones, 2000; Watts-Jones, 2002). It is the attempt to assimilate, figuratively or literally. *Internalized dominance* is the perception in the majority culture that the norms, customs, characteristics typically attributed to them are the standard by which all should adhere (Tappan, 2006). This involves seeing others, not as they are, but through the majority culture's lens. *Perpetuation and enforcement by institutions* occur as policies and systems are developed, implemented, and enforced from the majority cultural lens (Freire, 1970; DiAngelo, 2016; Tappan, 2006).

We, the authors, recognize that our intersectional identities (Crenshaw, 1989) and positions affect not only the meaning we make of the events we experienced, but also the very selection of the experiences we share. This creates an opportunity for a counter-narrative, or counter-storytelling, wherein the story of an individual, often from a non-dominant group, serves to counter the accepted objectivity of the dominant

narrative and reveal the deficit thinking undergirding the prevailing dominant discourse (Clark, Fasching-Varner, & Brimhall-Vargas, 2012). As such, we seek to highlight the inherent conflict in our experiences. Our aim is not debate; rather we seek to develop an appreciation of one another's lived experiences for transformative growth.

POSITIONALITY STATEMENT

To help the reader engage with the following *currere* fragments, we offer positionality statements for the three authors. During the reading group experience, Rodgers was a PhD candidate in Educational Studies. She identifies as a cis-gender, white female who grew up in a working class neighborhood. She has 16 years of experience as an educator in secondary and postsecondary education. Prior to beginning her PhD studies, she taught in a Title I high school in the Bronx and was the recipient of multiple international teacher fellowships. Within higher education, she has taught preservice teachers enrolled in professional education courses. These experiences have greatly influenced her understanding of the cycle of oppression.

Cain is an African American female associate professor of practice, adult and community education. She has over 22 years of experience at predominantly white institutions (PWIs), ranging from adjunct to contract faculty positions and formerly, program administrator. Her entry into the academy occurred after having a highly successful information technology career. She has served nine years in her current position. She has over 20 years of experience in facilitating intergroup racial dialogues. Cain identifies as working class, in contrast to the majority of her peers who identity as middle class. Her minoritized status is race (African American), gender (female), age (later in life entry into the academy), and socio-economic status (working class).

Messineo is a professor of sociology. She identifies as a U.S. born, cis-gender white female, first generation college attendee, and has over 25 years higher education experience. She participates in grassroot antipoverty, and antiracism community-based learning with her students and conducts implicit bias training. At the time of the intergroup dialogue she was serving as the campus' interim associate vice president for diversity. In this role, Messineo saw first-hand the extreme suffering that the cycle of oppression creates, and she struggled against the inertia that keeps the cycle in place.

THE BEGINNING – THE FORMATION OF THE BOOK GROUP

DiAngelo's (2016) accessible and engaging work introduces the concepts of socialization and the cycle of oppression, and explores definitions of race and racism and reflections on the "common patterns of well-meaning white people." DiAngelo explores the concepts of "white fragility" and "white silence," and cautions against the dangerous discourse around race and the white racial frame (Feagin, 2013). The book closes with a call for antiracist education and offers next steps. Participants found the book to be an excellent synthesis of the major topics on white racial literacy and felt they could use this work in future workshops and classes. The following section describes the authors' experiences at the start of the intergroup dialogue.

Messineo Reflections

This group emerged as a result of conversations around how the campus culture could be shifted beyond initial awareness regarding diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI). Donna (Black female) and I (white female) first connected over ideas of critical race theory, and we were looking for professional development

opportunities to bring to campus. Donna has a doctorate in higher education, is well versed in DEI literature, and she was especially energized by Robin DiAngelo's book, *What Does It Mean to Be White?* (2016) Donna said that it was the first book by a white author that she had read that was not afraid to be honest about the white experience, and she saw her own experience in every chapter. Her excitement made me eager to see the book. Within a few weeks, we decided to do a reading group.

While this planning was taking place during the summer, the campus was engaging in a struggle over whether or not the campus should break ties with an alumnus who had been linked to the use of racially charged, hateful language. The initial campus response was to not cut ties; but after public protest, the campus leadership reversed the decision. The need for discussion groups around this topic seemed even more important.

THE CALL

Once the intergroup dialogue planning was completed, an invitation was sent campus-wide to generate participation. Below are the reflections of the authors upon receiving the call.

Rodgers

I saw the email entitled Diversity this Week, and near the bottom is a call for participants in a faculty reading group. The book is *What Does It Mean to be White?* I had never heard of the book although having taught in teacher education for the past six years. I have repeatedly heard my students, preservice teachers, remark that race is no longer a problem in America. Their sentiment that race no longer matters is an example of color-blind racism that is prevalent in what some deem as a post-racial society (Bonilla-Silva, 2014). The ideology that race is insignificant in this era ignores the impact that racism has on people of color

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every day. My students see color-blindedness as a good thing. Well, so *did* I—before I knew any better—because the state of color-blindness is what I had been taught was the right way to be as a white teacher. My students are overwhelmingly white, female, and lower-middle class. Like a majority of pre-service teachers, many of my students, coming from rural communities, have never met and shook the hand of a person from another racial or ethnic background (Kincheloe, 2018). I rarely have more than one person of color in my class.

However, I also knew that I was not entirely comfortable with the realities of white privilege (McIntosh, 1988) or my place within the hierarchy of unearned privilege. I still struggled to articulate white privilege and racism when they came up in discussion, so I felt I needed to continue to learn, with the goal of actually being able to educate for social justice both in my classroom and in daily life.

Cain

The reading group was an excellent opportunity to provide additional resources and activities to my community engagement graduate course. The book provided a collection of concepts addressed by numerous social justice scholars and included narratives and stories of lived experiences. I was eager to engage in discussion regarding teaching about white cultural identities, privilege, and power with white

students. This was an opportunity to increase collaborative partnerships and identify additional resources to assist white students in critical reflection and analysis of these themes. One major course activity is the affinity group breakout session. White students work with white facilitators to discuss white cultural identities, power, and privilege. Engaging in dialogue with all white participants provides a sense of security and feeling that experiences discussed will be understood and not criticized, minimized, or ridiculed (Titler, 2017).

At our university, the majority of the students are from small white communities. I am often the first and only African American faculty member they encounter. Similar to most PWIs, faculty are predominantly white and not representative of the diversity of the student population. Within the mission of our department are the words, social justice, and faculty include applicable content within their curricula to address it. I anticipated some faculty would participate in the reading group. None of them came. Our department has a high percentage of ethnic diversity, which is mostly international faculty. I am the only full-time African American faculty member. I spoke to many of my colleagues regarding the reading group. Most indicated the lack of availability to participate or knowledge of the invitation. One expressed interest in attending, but never came. I was not surprised that most of the faculty with whom I inquired about their intent to attend were not going. However, I did think there would be a few more in attendance than came. I was taken aback by the low numbers. I learned that more had registered but did not come. My experiences in engaging in cross-cultural racial dialogue is that the majority of the white participants, in intergroup dialogues that I facilitate, are unaware of their privilege and do not believe there is a white cultural identity and reality (Tatum, 1992). I wondered if this impacted the lower attendance. At the end of the session, I inquired, "Where are all of the white people?" To what extent is this work valued, affirmed, and rewarded in the academy? We showcase and reward individual faculty and programs for inclusive excellence in pedagogy/andragogy for student/community impact. To what extent does this impact the dismantling of institutional enforcement of internalized dominance at the university?

Messineo

Some questioned whether the campus should be focusing on whiteness. For some it seemed self-centered and personally indulgent and exactly the type of reading group white people would put together. I think there are compelling arguments to be made around this concern; however, we found that understanding whiteness as the source of the cycle of oppression was an important place to start. Internalized dominance occurs in parallel with the internalized oppression that may be experienced by the group with less power. Our goal was to question the concept of white as default, the norm, regular, and introduce the idea that it is a construct.

THE EXPERIENCE

This section consists of *currere* fragments that offer insights into our experiences in the intergroup dialogue. These elements provide analysis of our reflections as they relate to the three themes from the cycle of oppression.

Rodgers

Taking a deep breath, I walked into the room for the first meeting, and there were a handful of faces, familiar faces, *the same familiar faces*, I see at every faculty 'diversity' shindig. Surprisingly, there are only a handful of people in the room—three with whom I have had prior experience working as part of interdepartmental and cross-campus diversity initiative and professional development workshops. Next to

me sits a faculty member from my own department (Cain) with whom I have explored racial identity development while assisting several semesters as a co-facilitator in her course. There is the interim director of the office of institutional diversity (Messineo) who is co-facilitating the intergroup dialogue, and one male faculty member known for leading inclusive pedagogy workshops. The three new faces included two white female faculty members I had encountered a few times and the other co-facilitator who I soon learned was the co-creator of the experience.

After we all shared about our own identities, I realized that every participant discussed or at least mentioned race as part of their identity. That is, every single person, except me. How could I dismiss one of the most obvious and salient features of my identity—my whiteness? I sat there, realizing that *I did not have to consider my own whiteness*, and that in and of itself was a privilege, a privilege that my colleagues of color could not ignore and my white colleagues chose to at least acknowledge. I had joined this reading group to be challenged as an educator so that I could confront my pre-service teachers' hegemonic assumptions and help them begin to develop a cognitive dissonance. But in my efforts to change my students' mindset, I became aware that my inadvertent, but natural, tendency to "move beyond race" was an act of white internalized dominance (DiAngelo, 2011).

Racism in the academy is, as DiAngelo (2016) explicated, "ultimately a white problem, and the burden for interrupting it belongs to white people" (p. 66). As a white instructor teaching at a PWI, I wield considerable power in my classroom to guide my white students in acknowledging their own fragility. What they learn will impact how they interact with their future students, colleagues, and the community. By projecting the problem of racism onto my students who, while unwittingly participating in the cycle of oppression, cannot yet comprehend the full

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impact of their actions in maintaining their internalized white dominance, I am avoiding dealing with my own fragility (Behm Cross, 2017). I must acknowledge that I am also complicit in this cycle.

The group was getting progressively smaller. There were various reasons offered including scheduling conflicts and increased workloads. I questioned the value of participating, asking myself "what I was getting out of it" because I 'knew' concepts in the book. Did I need this? Did I need to take on the additional emotional labor of being an 'ally' when I had my own frustrations with the academy? Did I need to spend time engaging in difficult conversations?

Week after week, the answer to all three questions was unequivocally "yes." As the size of the group shrank, the depth of conversations became more profound, yet less directly attached to the book. The weekly meeting became a support group of sorts, as participants shared and discussed the latest in local and academy politics, as well as the latest transgressions both experienced and witnessed. This included academic mobbing against minoritized individuals, defined as the "insidious, non-violent and sophisticated kind of psychological bullying that predominantly takes place in college and university campuses" (Khoo, 2010, p. 65). Through these ongoing conversations, we witnessed the cycle of oppression in each of the participant's lives.

Cain

The cycle of oppression is a regular occurrence in my life. I and other African American participants shared many experiences with the reading group. To write and talk about these experiences is traumatic and therapeutic. Researching and discovering that these experiences are pervasive in the academy provides a slight level of reassurance that the microaggressions, institutional racism, and internalized dominance are

real and not imagined. Experiences included: being the one dissenting voice on an issue and a colleague announces, "well, we have consensus on that topic;" providing a recommendation and documentation to justify it during a brainstorming session that is ignored and the next meeting someone else says the same thing and it is adopted; being falsely accused of advising students, in error, and having to explain, over and over, in meetings that it is not true; assuming that I came to the academy, devoid of skills; removing a stack of handouts from the table, asking about it, and assuming I do not have the original to make additional copies; having a supervisor take exclusive credit for a project I planned, developed, implemented, and administered with a committee of partners; assuming an ideological difference of opinion is an affront to professional reputation, worthy of expressions of anger and retaliation.

Messineo

As a person in the dominant group I must constantly confront my internalized dominance. Even my idea of how book discussions are run had to be tempered by the needs of the group. It was difficult to know how to balance my roles as group administrator and member. It was freeing to say, "This may not be how I would do this task and it is important for me to let go." But even having the opportunity to exercise that choice of 'letting go' is an example of dominance. People without that position do not have the choice to relinquish power. It was a powerful learning moment. Looking back, we can see how the collaborative experience pulled uncovered misinformation about targeted groups and created a context where internalized dominance could be revealed.

This experience has been helpful for me as a facilitator and while the content is not new, having it pulled together this way with this language was helpful. One of the core concepts in the book is white fragility which DiAngelo (2016) describes as "the state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves" (p. 247). These behaviors re-establish white position and privilege. It was easy for me to identify white fragility and this identification allowed the group to step back and see people on a journey that can potentially lead to greater understanding, ultimately breaking the cycle. We saw how fragility leads to the perpetuation and enforcement of the norms by institutions that keep the cycle in place. Even choosing to stay in the group was for some of us an act of defiance against the institutional norms that devalue these types of experiences.

The most challenging part was dealing with the sense that this was yet another example of people of color educating the majority about oppression. Our most informed colleagues were Black women and the burden of emotional and instructional labor was primarily on them. As DiAngelo and other scholars of white racial literacy (2016) point out, the majority bears the responsibility of educating itself. We found ourselves navigating our own group differences about how best to address systemic oppression. The debates over different opinions and issues helped us clarify our own positions. One quote from Cain that really resonated with me was that "Conflict is inevitable—our goal is not to manage conflict but instead to transform conflict." We worked to find a way to transform the conflict and break the cycle.

WHAT WE ARE TAKING AWAY FROM OUR EXPERIENCE

While the group attrition was troubling, there was agreement among the members that the reading group and intergroup dialogue was a valuable experience.. The most immediate benefit was the networking.. The time together combatted the limited networking and mentoring opportunities available to Black female scholars (Agosto & Karanxha, 2011; Stanley, 2006) in two ways. First, our

meetings provided younger scholars of color with mentoring provided by Cain, whose experience, not only as a scholar of color but also as a community organizer and former corporate professional was invaluable. Second, the experience provided networking opportunities for all participants. Third, the experience helped identify valuable resources and strategies for workshops and classes. Fourth, we experienced increased awareness about the cycle of oppression in our own lives that has been transformative. The following excerpts reflect on the key take-aways.

Rodgers

The confidential environment allowed me to share my own experiences *confronting the dominant order* (Windschitl & Joseph, 2011) with colleagues. This group recognized and validated me without engaging in some of the bullying-practices so prevalent in the academy that leads to long-term silencing and departure of high-achieving minoritized faculty members (Martin & Beese, 2018).

Through sustained interactions with faculty, like Messineo, I came to see that in many ways the scholars of color were, almost by default, teaching us white folks about our white privilege. While they did not sign up to be *de facto* spokespersons for the experiences of all faculty (and persons) of color, there seemed to be an invisible force in every meeting. They explained, analyzed, or annotated the references from the book to their own interactions so that we could grasp the extent of oppression they confronted daily. I realized this was not their job and I must actively seek out works written by scholars of color. Then I must include these works in my own course syllabi and researchwithout appropriating their work. Credit needed to be given to their experiences and perspectives in the same way that I would do for white scholars without even thinking about it.

The insidiousness of white privilege exists not in that it is unknown to whites, but rather because it is all too familiar to us, inextricably woven into the very fabric of our professed democratic values (DiAngelo, 2016). Sitting in my first PhD curriculum course, I remember the professor explaining, "A fish cannot see water" in reference to a quotation attributed to the anthropologist Margaret Mead, "If a fish were to become an anthropologist, the last thing it would discover would be water" (Spindler, 1982, p. 24, as cited in Joseph, 2011, p. 25). So too, is white privilege because: "*When privilege is the air that you breathe from the very first moment you're born, it can be really hard to see how your footsteps have been part of the storm*" (italics added, Voxfeminista, 2009). To see my own footprints, I must accept that the life-long process of conscientization (Freire, 2000) is one which requires that I engage in the 'primal setting at a distance' from my own understanding of culture, thereby transforming culture into an 'other self,' a being which I may observe, and with which I may develop a relationship (Buber, 1972). It is only then that I may be able to recognize how I have been "part of the storm" (Voxfeminista, 2009).

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Cain

The book group exceeded my expectations and was highly valuable, professionally and personally. Although I knew all of the participants, I had the opportunity to engage in lively weekly discussion . There were times when we talked about personal andprofessional issues. In many cases those issues correlated with the themes in the book. I sensed that some may have felt we were veering off course. I was comfortable

with what occurred. Learning is personal, emotional, and physical. It happens in unexpected ways, resulting in unanticipated actions, reactions, and outcomes. I grew closer to the participants. We developed an incredible bond of trust. One of the chapters in Brookfield and Associates' (2019) book was titled, *Building Trust and Negotiating Conflict When Teaching Race*. One activity, naming and narrating, allows students to tell the story of who they are by their name. This could include the meaning of the name, an ancestor as their namesake, and how they feel about their name. I use a similar exercise at the beginning of class. Students learn about each other, without conflict or fear of offending. In the reading group the facilitators provided activities, similar to this. We drew our hand and wrote five cultural identities and shared the dissimilar responses then affirming each others identities. Then, we talked about the cultural identities that we held but did not list. I was surprised at one that I did not include, educator. I have always included that in describing myself. It is part of my ancestral legacy, and an integral part of who I am. It is what DiAngelo (2016) describes as socialization. She uses the graphic of the iceberg of culture to describe the majority of our socialization that is hidden from sight and awareness. At the time, I was experiencing conflict at an overwhelming level. I could not believe that subconsciously I dissociated with my identity as an educator.

In co-facilitating dialogues on internalized oppression, I am compelled to share my challenges in overcoming them. My lived experiences vary from most of my African American colleagues who came of age post school segregation. I was immersed in my culture through regular interaction with extended family, church, neighborhood, and up to ninth grade. I love and affirm my culture. I internalized oppression through efforts to prove I am worthy ("work twice as hard to get half as far") and not assessing the negative impact I may have on someone's self-esteem in my rush to complete a task. I share with my students and workshop attendees examples of my struggle to ensure my actions are not contributing to the enforcement and perpetuation of institutional oppression.

Messineo

This intergroup dialogue was a transformative experience for me because it was the most sustained conversation around white racial literacy that I have participated in since graduate school. The book itself is an excellent resource, and it will inform my teaching. The connections that were forged as a result of the conversations will last beyond the reading of the text and the writing of this paper. I am thankful to all of my colleagues for everything they shared and for their support through this journey. I will continue building my own white racial literacy knowing that while I will continue to fail, I will also grow. I am committed to engaging others in this conversation and breaking the institutional norms that enable the cycle to persist.

DISCUSSION

Collectively, we moved beyond our cultural lens. The use of intergroup dialogue around the book by Robin DiAngelo (2016) provided a means to explore the cycle of oppression and the implications of whiteness in the academy and created a strong professional and personal bond. The authors used the inquiry method of *currere* to gain a comprehensive understanding of their experiences. The book served as a valuable resource and an effective catalyst for an intergroup dialogue that shaped our understanding of oppression in higher education. We recognize DiAngelo's book was our "explicit curriculum" (Eisner, 1994, p. 87). It served as the vehicle to begin exploring our intra- and interpersonal connections to internalized oppression, internalized dominance, and their perpetuation and enforcement by institutions and ourselves.. Our experience is not unique, but rather symptomatic of the racialchallenge across academe. We encourage others to create intergroup dialogues around white racial literacy with the commitment to break the cycle of oppression. Through our trio-*currere* journey, we identified five recommendations::

1. Commit to a long-term experience because it takes time to build community.

2. Commit to going beyond 'the academic' because while the book was a valuable academic resource, it was the connection with colleagues that created the most change.
3. Provide opportunities for relationship-building. These may include sharing a meal and sharing the facilitator role. Our telling of past connections was a critical link to fostering continued development of our relationship.
4. Work to integrate reflection into the process and keep growing beyond the text.
5. Become familiar with scholarship from oft-marginalized researchers.. Cite their work in your own and seek to learn about the historical, social, political, cultural, and institutional forces that perpetuate the cycle.

No program is the panacea for long-standing racial bias in academia. However, sustained intergroup dialogue supported by faculty reading groups allows for faculty and staff to explore bias within their own lives and workspaces. Relationship with one another is fostered and strengthened through sustained dialogue, allowing for the development of a shared understanding and appreciation for one another and thus the creation of long-term partnerships, alliances, and coalitions that can work toward ending the cycle of oppression.

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