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ARTICLE

Claiming a voice on race

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I reflect on how my white racial identity shaped and, in turn, was shaped by my dissertation data collection. I identify specific choices and experiences in the research interviews that were influenced by my race, using data both from my own journal as well as feedback about my interviews from two informants of color. I also trace how conducting the interviews and writing about them in my journal affected how I make meaning of my racial identity. I offer these reflections as a contribution to two conversations, both related to exploring and learning about race. First, my discussion of how being white influenced my study contributes to important dialogues about how researcher identities reverberate through the research process. Second, my consideration of the change in my racial identity suggests implications for those interested in learning from and about race. Specifically, it suggests that whites must claim a voice on race in order to contribute meaningfully to cross-racial learning.

KEY WORDS

- first person research
- learning
- racial identity development
- whiteness

How can Black and White women be allies and leave room open for disagreement? . . . We cannot be real allies to each other if we cannot live up to our own convictions. This stance is risky and potentially the most frightening for those White liberals who consider themselves allies in a struggle. To stand up and challenge Black women, particularly on issues of race, is *to claim a voice on race*. Although it is tempting to defer expertise to those who have lived biculturally, White women cannot engage until they claim their own perspective, including their perspective on privilege. (Bell, Meyerson, Nkomo, & Scully, 2003, p. 400, my emphasis).

I am a white¹ woman who studies learning in racially diverse teams. I am interested in what factors enable learning across difference, how learning in diverse groups looks different from learning in homogeneous settings, and how team members establish trust and safety in such groups. The research grows from my own intensive learning process about race, about what it means to be white, and about the role of whites in addressing racial injustice.

This learning process began, not so long ago, when I was a doctoral student, writing about race in my dissertation. I was struggling to claim a voice on race, feeling, as a white woman, a lack of credibility or authority in thinking about race. In fact, it was because of my dissertation research that I have been able to develop my own stance on race. And it was that experience that has enabled me to think more deeply about what it means to learn within and from racial diversity. Ultimately, I have come to believe that in order to engage in learning across race, one must claim a voice on race, whatever one's racial background. Since this is difficult for many white people, I believe that writing about my evolution might be helpful for others.

In many ways, race remains an undiscussable, at least in the United States (Ely & Thomas, 2001; Proudford, 2002). Some of what I say here has been difficult to write, but we can only learn from and about race if we make it discussable and we can only make it discussable if people choose to make public their own experiences. I think whites have a particular responsibility to do so, given the relative power and privilege that comes with our racial identity.

In this article, I reflect on my dissertation experience as a form of first-person research, an attempt to explore what was happening with me as I conducted a qualitative, largely third-person research project. I focus specifically on the mutual impact of my racial identity on the research and, in turn, the research on my racial identity. These reflections contribute to important conversations about race, research and learning. In my description of the impact of being white on my data collection, I add to the literature which argues that researcher identities reverberate throughout the research process (e.g. Behar, 1996; Hertz, 1997b; Kram, 1985). My discussion of my evolving racial identity suggests implications for broader debates on learning from and about race.

I begin with some theoretical grounding in the notion of first-person research. I then briefly describe the dissertation and its methodology, and write

about how my racial identity influenced some of my research choices and experiences. Then I discuss how my data collection process affected my interpretation of what it means to be white. I conclude with thoughts on race, learning and voice.

First-person research

First-person research, or what is often called reflexive research and writing (M. Fine, 1994; Hertz, 1997a) is controversial. At best it is simply considered unscientific; at worst self-indulgent or narcissistic (Mykhalovskiy, 1997). Yet, slowly but surely, self-revelatory writing is not only being tolerated, but, in some circles, expected (DeVault, 1997). Reflexive ethnography is gaining ground in anthropology (Behar, 1993; Hertz, 1997b; Kondo, 1990), and first-person approaches are encouraged in action research spanning sociology, management, education and other fields (e.g. Bell, 2000; Chandler & Torbert, 2003; M. Fine, 1994; Gordon, 2000; Kram, 1985; Reason & Bradbury, 2001; Torbert, 1991).

Reflexive research is 'consciousness about being conscious; thinking about thinking' (Meyerhoff & Ruby, 1982, quoted in Michalowski, 1997, p. 1). Another describes it as 'a continuing model of self-analysis and political awareness' (Hertz, 1997a, p. xiii). Those who argue for this articulated self-awareness assert that all research is done from a particular position or social location; it is incumbent on the researcher to make that position explicit and to consider its effects on the research. This impulse has been driven by political concerns. Social scientists have too often exploited the subjects of their research by a self-sealed, superordinate view which implies that their findings are fact, as opposed to interpretation, thus denying the hand of the researcher in everything from conceptualization to research design to data collection to analysis and writing.

In contrast, reflexive research provides 'insights on the workings of the social world and insight on how that knowledge came into existence. By bringing subject and object back into the same space (indeed, even the same sentence), authors give their audiences the opportunity to evaluate them as "situated actors"' (Hertz, 1997a, p. viii). As Behar writes:

. . . (I)t is gratuitous to think that an ethnographer 'gets' a less-privileged woman's 'experience' by taking down her life story; and it is even more gratuitous to think her work is done when she has framed the other woman's 'own words' with a few comfortable generalizations that make no connections to her own position as the one who brings the story back across the border . . .

It has long seemed to me that most life histories stop short of their goal of decentering Western notions of whose life deserves a place in the world of (our) letters. We ask for revelations from others, but we reveal little or nothing of ourselves; we make others vulnerable, but we ourselves remain invulnerable. I've tried to do something

a little different here. I stand revealed throughout the book as a character . . . I hold up a number of mirrors to [my informant's] story, mirrors large and small, that are as revealing of me as they are of her. (1993, p. 272)

In fact, as Mykhalovskiy notes, the charge that 'only autobiographical work is about the writer's self presumes that there is work that is not autobiographical; that sociological work about 'others' is not at the same time about the self of the writer' (1997, pp. 242–243).

I believe that first-person inquiry is particularly important for those writing about charged topics like race, ethnicity and other social identities. It can be presumptuous to write about the experiences of others from backgrounds and cultures that the researcher knows little about. However, it eases the presumption if the researcher submits herself to the same scrutiny. In that way, not only can the research shed light on identity issues more generally, it can also illuminate the impact of identity on the research process itself.

Some might argue that researchers should explore the experiences only of people with similar backgrounds to their own. But that suggests that we can never understand each other across differences – that we shouldn't even try. It shuts a door. In my case, by choosing to undertake my research as a 'vulnerable observer' (Behar, 1996), I hoped to open a door, allowing for new possibilities and learnings and connections. What Brodkey (1987, quoted in Behar, 1993) says about ethnography also speaks to research more broadly: it is 'a process by which each of us confronts our respective inability to comprehend the experience of others even as we recognize the absolute necessity of continuing the effort to do so' (p. 271). In my case, trying to comprehend the experience of others not only shed light on broader identity processes, it helped me comprehend myself.

Dissertation inquiry: organizational influence on identity

Influenced by critical management literature on the relationship between power and identity (e.g. Knights & Willmott, 1985), and on how power works implicitly and ubiquitously in organizations (e.g. Jermier, Knights & Nord, 1994), my dissertation research explored how organizations subtly influence the race, gender and class identities of their members. I gathered data in four sites, including a small non-profit agency with six staff; a 60-employee communications consulting company; a consumer products company with 5000 employees; and a large financial services firm with 17,000 employees.

In each organization, I collected three kinds of data: interview, observational and archival. My interviews included 13–16 interviews in the three larger organizations and eight interviews at the small non-profit organization for a total of 52 interviews. In each organization I interviewed the CEO and/or Vice President of Human Resources or their equivalent. I then interviewed a cross-

section of rank-and-file employees about their experiences at work. Overall, I created a diverse sample by race or ethnicity, gender, and organizational level. The sample was about half white and half people of color – a quarter African American, one-eighth Latino and one-eighth Asian. It was about one-third men and two-thirds women and about one-fifth clerical or support staff and four-fifths professional or managerial staff. My observation in each organization varied, but generally included observing events like diversity trainings and new employee orientations. However, at the small non-profit agency, I was a participant observer for about four months, serving on one of the organization's committees. Finally, my data collection also included two other sources. I asked informants to answer some reflection questions about the interview within a couple of days after the interview took place. And, I also kept a journal where I wrote about my own thoughts, feelings and behaviors during the research process.

While my initial interest was how organizational policies and practices influenced individual identities, the first several informants referred more to interactions with others – peers, subordinates, bosses, clients. Because of this, I turned to the symbolic interaction literature as an underlying framework, which understands identity as constructed through interaction (Blumer, 1969; G. A. Fine, 1992; McCall & Simmons, 1978). Ultimately, I inductively developed a process model for organizational influence on identity, which suggests organizations have both a direct effect, through their policies and practices, and an indirect effect, mediated by interactions among individuals (Foldy, 2002).

How did this research grow out of myself as well as find its way into myself? Reinharz notes that, 'we both *bring* the self to the field and *create* the self in the field' (1997, p. 3, author's emphasis). I begin by exploring how my self, in the embodiment of my white racial identity, influenced some of my research choices and experiences. Then I turn to how my identity was shaken up and recast by this research.

Tracing my identity in the research

My choice of topic grew directly out of my life experiences, including a somewhat inchoate, but strong desire to deal with my own issues about race. On the one hand, the topic sprung from my belief that work organizations tend to reproduce and perpetuate societal inequities based on gender, class and race. On the other hand, my topic was also born from working with a number of progressive political organizations which all failed at diversifying beyond their largely white membership. I knew that I did not really understand race or racial dynamics or my own position and role as a white person in U.S. society. While I wouldn't have put it in these terms, I not only did not have a voice on race, I did not really know

how to think about race. In fact, I was intimidated by the whole charged arena. Yet I also felt driven to explore it, using my doctoral program and my dissertation in particular as my opportunity.

My white identity didn't only influence my choice of topic, it also influenced how I went about the research. My status as a white woman interviewing people of color – someone from a dominant group researching a population from marginalized social groups – brought with it concerns about power inequities. I was also aware that some researchers believe that cross-race interviewing results in less valid data (Alderfer, Alderfer, Tucker & Tucker, 1980; Bell & Nkomo, 2001; Cannon, 1991; Riessman, 1991). Because of this, I felt a need to establish myself as a trustworthy white person, someone aware of prejudice, discrimination and racism. The following excerpt from an interview transcript illustrates my approach. Gloria,² an African American woman, was telling me about moving to Boston in 1975, just when the struggle over busing was at its ugliest. I asked why her mother had moved her family up to Boston.

Gloria: Well, my mother . . . always had a desire to move to Boston . . . She always said that we needed to be here so that we could have exposure to a different side of life than what we would see in the south. It was just all about [the south] holding you down and the north afforded you the opportunity to expand, to broaden your horizons . . .

Erica: I know there's a lot of debate about that, whether the north is really that different, whether the racism is just more subtle.

Gloria: I could definitely sit on a panel for a discussion on that . . . That would definitely be a good discussion for the future.

Erica: It's interesting that your mother wanted to come to Boston, because my general sense is that the reputation among African Americans about Boston is that it's a pretty hard town. Now this was 25 years ago. But in some ways, you would think it would be even worse, especially with the busing.

Gloria: Exactly. That's funny that you say that . . . [My mother] never really had the opportunity to see Boston for its true self as I can see it 20 something years later, you know? And I think she just looked at it as . . . [offering] a lot of hope for her. But for someone in my generation, you could beg to differ because there are other cities that I think that would probably definitely be more rewarding to an African American . . .

I had some concerns about my approach at the time. It felt as if I was not being an objective or detached observer, yet the alternative seemed problematic as well. Here is an excerpt from the journal I kept during the data collection process:

I have a dilemma about the way I ask questions, especially when talking to people of color. I want to prove that I'm trustworthy, so I want to sound knowledgeable about racism. But that means I may ask more leading questions or signal them to talk in a

particular way. Of course, not saying those things would signal them to talk in a different way. Or I may not ask a question because I think it will make me look naïve, e.g. if they describe a particular situation which seems racist to me, but then I should ask, 'why was that situation problematic?' But I could then signal either naiveté or worse . . .

As I note in the journal, there is no objective ground, nor is there any way to know. Saying something probably influenced the interview in some way; silence may well have done the same. Ultimately, I chose to continue that kind of signaling if the opportunity arose. Because of that, I believe, I was able to build a strong, though of course temporary, connection in almost all my interviews, including cross-race interviews, which resulted in rich and revealing data. Gloria, as one example, went on to talk in great depth about how she had experienced racism at work and very movingly described how she had worked to overcome it (though she did have reservations about the interview which I describe below). My journal did prompt me to reconsider my question-asking. I decided that, whether it made me look naïve or not, it was always better to ask that crucial follow-up question, rather than assuming I understood the conclusions that the informant had drawn from a particular incident. But my struggle grew out of an acute awareness of my racial identity and how it might be affecting the research process and the very data I collected. A question, an allusion, a particular phrasing – each sent a message which shaped the relationship between my informant and me, thus influencing what my informant would tell me. Every choice seemed fateful.

This sensation was reinforced by some limited data on how informants viewed my interviews and me. At the end of the interview, I asked the informants if they would respond to a few questions by email about the experience of the interview itself.³ Everyone agreed; the actual response rate was 61 percent. All of the responses were largely or entirely positive. This likely indicates a response bias: those who were more critical may well have been less likely to respond, despite a plea in the introduction for their honest feedback. The vast majority of the statements indicated that there was little if any discomfort; that if there was discomfort that was to be expected given that they were talking to a stranger; and that I had an ability to set people at their ease. These comments were typical:

After the interview I was pleased about our conversation. It was a nice opportunity for reflection and observation.

The experience was very pleasant and a little exciting.

[The interview] was very enlightening, I felt like I'd just gotten a lot off my chest . . . I'm glad I agreed to it. It was helpful in a lot of ways, sort of cleansed my soul.

However, there were some comments which brought my racial identity squarely into the spotlight. One came from an African American woman, Jessica, who

believed that at one point in the interview that I ‘really didn’t hear my response or you were probing and leading me towards a different answer. As I had said in my interview, I identify myself as a black woman. The two go hand-in-hand – in my book they are inseparable . . . I felt at times you were leading me to say otherwise’. I had no intention of leading Jessica to say one thing or another. I did try to understand, and asked in several different ways, what lay behind that feeling of inseparability. Here are several of my questions from the transcript:

Erica: Was it meaningful that this particular phrase came as a whole? I believe you said, ‘assertive and intelligent African American woman’.

Erica: Do you ever think of yourself as just a woman or just as African American or do those two things tend to go together?

Erica: I – what is always interesting to me is that – I mean, I don’t have – I haven’t interviewed that many people yet, but all of the African American women have put black and woman together, and white women don’t do it . . . So, I’m trying to understand what is it about the African American woman experience that really links those two so solidly together.

As I review my language, it is somewhat confusing and could have given the impression, since I asked the question several times in several ways, of not accepting her initial responses. My phrasing probably reflected my discomfort as a white woman asking questions about race to women of color.

Gloria, the woman with whom I discussed Boston’s reputation for racism, directly remarked on my race in her feedback to me. She noted that the interview had made her uncomfortably aware of race:

I felt like I was opening up and letting a stranger in on a private part of who I am as a person as well as a private part of the African American experience to some degree, without really knowing how that information would be perceived by those who view it. It also made me more aware of the fact that I see color, although I try hard not to. Meaning, I was constantly aware of your presence as a white person, not just a person. I’m sure it’s because race/diversity was the premise of the conversation. But, it feels much more comfortable when you don’t have to think about it, race that is. Yes, I felt like I was on an emotional roller coaster as we cruised from one topic to another.

I appreciated her honesty because it surfaced a naïve desire that I didn’t even know I had. I had felt very good about our interview. At the end of the interview (which lasted well past the scheduled ending time with her encouragement), she said that she enjoyed the interview more than she had expected. I felt that we really had connected across race. Yet, in her email message, Gloria was telling me that my whiteness was always present for her, and because of that, the interview had been a mixed experience for her. My disappointment in her comment made me realize that somehow I had hoped otherwise, that race might become

invisible, that we could transcend race. She made me face the reality that we can't eliminate race from an inherently racialized situation. While I had known that intellectually, reading Gloria's comments brought it home for me in a potent way.

Though I was already intensely aware of it, Gloria's and Jessica's honest feedback reiterated how my racial identity was a factor in the research process, providing some data from the perspective of the researched. Their comments also contribute to the ongoing conversation about how research identities impinge on the research process (e.g. Behar, 1993; Kondo, 1990; Kram, 1985). Such reverberations are ubiquitous, but few researchers choose to explore them. Gloria's and Jessica's remarks also reminded me that, whatever my good intentions and naïve hopes, my research was shaped by long-standing societal racial understandings and divisions. Whatever our intentions, researchers have less control than we like to think. However, rather than avoiding cross-race research, I believe we learn more by doing it and reflecting on it. How does the researcher's racial identity affect the research process and the data that he or she collects? Having conversations about what we do opens up the research process to scrutiny. And the more we take responsibility for the construction of the research process, the less we can cloak ourselves with its mysteries.

While my focus in this section has been how my identity influenced the research, it has been difficult to isolate that from how I myself was changed. I continue that discussion in the next section.

Recasting myself through the research

My data collection explored how my informants' gender, race and class identities were changed through interactions with others in organizational settings. I couldn't help but recognize that my own white identity was affected by my interactions with my informants. I wrote about some of my experiences in my journal, as the process was happening.

It was some months after I finished the data collection, though, that I sat down to think this through systematically. In the meantime, I had discovered Helms's model of white racial identity development (1990), influenced by models of black identity development (e.g. Cross, 1991).⁴ She distinguishes racial identity from simple racial categorization or group membership. Racial identity is 'a sense of group or collective identity based on one's *perception* that he or she shares a common racial heritage with a particular group' (Helms, 1990, p. 3, author's emphasis). I have found it useful in understanding my own evolution. (I should point out that I became familiar with this model after my data collection was finished and, therefore, after making the journal entries excerpted below, so I was not influenced by it as I was writing.)

Helms's model of white racial identity development

Helms's model includes two phases, each with three stages. The first phase involves abandoning racism. The second phase is the process of defining a positive white identity. The 'Contact' stage, the stage that begins the first phase of abandoning racism, begins as soon as one encounters either the idea or the reality of African Americans. It is characterized by naïveté or trepidation about blacks and no real awareness of being white. Generally, people in this stage have little engagement with blacks. In the 'Disintegration' stage, the individual acknowledges her own race and first recognizes societal racial inequities. She may take a very moral stand, wanting to show compassion and respect to blacks. However, because the discovery is painful and in conflict with previous beliefs (and possibly with the beliefs of other whites around her), she will likely avoid interracial environments and therefore the issue as a whole. The third stage, 'Reintegration', is characterized not only by a conscious acknowledgement of white identity, but also a belief in white superiority. Social inequities are seen as due to blacks' individual or cultural deficiencies. The residual feelings of guilt and anxiety from the Disintegration stage often turn into fear and anger towards African Americans.

'Pseudo-Independence' is the fourth stage and also inaugurates the second phase of developing a positive white identity. It begins the process of finding a new, positive white identity. The individual doubts her earlier belief in white superiority and acknowledges that whites, including herself, are responsible for racism. She may start to learn more about black life and culture. However, the individual still looks to African Americans, rather than whites, to explain racism. Individuals in the next stage, 'Immersion/Emersion', shift their attention to white experiences and white models of overcoming racism, on their path to developing a positive white identity. Interest in changing white attitudes on race replaces attention to 'fixing' blacks. Helms notes:

Emotional as well as cognitive restructuring can happen during this stage. Successful resolution of this stage apparently requires emotional catharsis in which the person re-experiences previous emotions that were denied or distorted. Once these negative feelings are expressed, the person may begin to feel a euphoria perhaps akin to a religious rebirth. (1990, p. 62)

Finally, the last stage, 'Autonomy', continues the process of 'internalizing, nurturing, and applying the new definition of Whiteness' (p. 62). People no longer either denigrate or idealize based on race, because race has been defused as a threat. The individual will likely broaden her learning about other cultural groups and explore the connections between racism and other forms of oppression like sexism or homophobia.

Applying Helms's model to my own experience

This model helps illuminate my changes over the process of data collection, as I moved, roughly, from the Pseudo-Independent stage through the Immersion/Emersion stage to the beginnings of the Autonomy stage. I will begin with a long journal excerpt from very near the beginning of the data collection process. It places me in the Pseudo-Independent stage, with acute awareness of white racism, including my own, but still a dependence on African Americans to help me figure it out. (Some explanatory notes are found in brackets.)

I had a dream . . . that I wanted to record. JM, my only black schoolmate and friend in elementary school, told me I was exploiting her by asking her to help me with my research. [I have not, in reality, seen or spoken with JM since childhood and have not been in touch with her about my research.] [In the dream] I had asked her for help previously and not acknowledged her help, treated her only as someone who was useful to me, rather than someone who was a friend, someone I valued . . .

The dream indicates to me anxiety about the [research] project. I remember very clearly as a child thinking JM was ugly because she was so dark and I remember she had this very pretty dress, white with blue and green flowers, that I really liked and I didn't think she deserved it because she was dark and ugly. I also knew I shouldn't feel this way, I knew my mother would be horrified . . . [My mother was a civil rights activist]. So, I have particular feelings and associations with JM and, then, I have an ongoing sense of guilt and discomfort and awkwardness about my feelings toward people of color in general . . . I think I feel a little like a usurper, a fraud. Here I am doing all this work on race and ethnicity, when I have so little action in my past to give me any credibility. I realized a day or two ago (unrelated to the dream, but it certainly fits here) that perhaps in a way I'm trying to change my own identity, sense of self, through this project. Changing to be an anti-racist white woman from someone who has been often uncomfortable and fearful and sometimes racist and mean-spirited. So, I think the dream about JM reflects my fear that I am somehow using this project, using the people I interview, for my own purposes, to make me feel better about myself. And that I might, because of my ongoing discomfort, treat people more as informants – literally, as people who can provide me information – than as fellow human beings.

In my interview with Dee on Wednesday, I felt so great that I could talk with a black woman about how it feels to be black (and the confusion she feels between being black and Jamaican and other identities) and do so in a way that, apparently, felt ok with her. We had a great conversation, she said afterwards that she thought it was really interesting to talk about; she didn't seem uncomfortable with anything I said or asked her. I was so glad it went well, it gave me such a sense of relief and hope. I feel like I am looking for absolution from this project. I want people of color, especially black people, to tell me I'm ok, I'm not a bad person, I might even be a good person. I am realizing, again, how much I feel I have to atone for and that this project is my atonement . . . I'm not quite sure where to go with this. Should I not do the project for this reason? That doesn't make any sense. I think perhaps I can

provide some useful information. I think I am addressing issues that are often overlooked. Perhaps I can even disseminate some useful learning by documenting my own journey. But, it does make me nervous, for precisely what I've said here. I am trying to use black people, as JM said in my dream. I am trying to use them to make me feel better about myself. That's dangerous and I should be on the lookout for it.

When I began my research, I strongly believed, as I still do, that race and racism permeate the lives of all Americans, that whites have a race, and that whites have a responsibility to challenge racism. But, as the excerpt painfully reveals, I was very much caught up in my shame and guilt about my own culpability in racism and looking for African Americans to exonerate me. This is reminiscent of the Pseudo-Independence stage, which is partly characterized by looking to blacks for their help and guidance in dealing with racism. However, I did recognize that that was a 'dangerous' thing to do, as I write at the end. I have some sense that that places the responsibility and the authority outside of myself. I elaborated on this thought in another excerpt written about three months later.

I've started to clarify why I think I have to be so careful about talking about some of my own history, e.g. the story about JM and the dress. My concern is that people of color shouldn't have to take care of white people when white people feel guilty or feel angst or even feel really confused. I think such stories can be misconstrued as needing to get something off my chest and then looking for absolution, for someone to say it's ok, you were a little girl, you've changed, whatever.

This reminds me of Latifa [an African American informant who sat on the diversity committee at one of my research sites] talking about how she doesn't like it when Mike, the white male head of the diversity committee, says, 'I'm just a white guy, I don't know this stuff.' My memory is that she had a hard time articulating why she found that problematic, but I think I understand it better now. In a way he's saying, 'I'm not responsible, I'm just a stupid white guy. How can I know better? Given my position, I'm bound to be dumb/oppressive/blind, need help and guidance, etc.' So, in an odd way, it kinds of absolves him of responsibility. You need people of color to explain things, guide things. You can hand off responsibility. I felt a lot of kinship with Mike's statement, which was why I tried so hard to understand why it was problematic. I could imagine saying a similar thing myself, and perhaps have on occasion. I do understand why it's a problem now.

That discomfort with relying on people of color to help me with my own struggle indicates to me that I was moving into the Immersion/Emersion stage in which individuals are more likely to look to white experiences and role models. At this time I became quite interested in Frankenberg's (1993) study of white women and, in particular, her descriptions of some white women active in anti-racism work.

Helm also notes that the Immersion/Emersion stage will likely include what she calls 'emotional restructuring', or some kind of 'emotional catharsis' which can result in 'euphoria'. As I read this, I was struck with the memory of my happiness after completing my first few interviews with people of color. I

described above how satisfying my interview with Dee was: it felt 'great', it gave me a sense of 'relief and hope'. On another occasion, I wrote about an interview with Sarah, a black woman I knew from my experience as a participant observer at the small, non-profit agency. At the end of the interview, she indicated that she'd enjoyed the interview and then noted that she hoped that her experience with the organization would help her have friendships with white women, something she'd never had, but felt as a lack in her life. I was very moved by this and shared my discomfort with the homogeneity of my own friendship group. My journal picks it up from here:

This was a very nice moment. It had been a good interview and Sarah had said it didn't seem terribly long and that she enjoyed it, which I was glad about. But that last two minutes where we talked about our friendship networks, I really felt like we connected. We talked for a few minutes more about [organizational] stuff . . . Then, as I left, I held out my hand for her to shake but she said, 'no I need a hug' (or something like that) and so we hugged, which was very nice. I left glowing . . .

So I was 'glowing' as a result of this interaction. As Helms's framework would understand it, the act of both recognizing my negative emotions and beginning the process of moving beyond them could result in the kind of euphoria I felt at that time. That emotional experience also would suggest that I was at the Immersion/Emersion stage.

Towards the end of my data collection, as I noted earlier, I would place myself at the beginning of the Autonomy stage, which is characterized by more comfort with race in general and with one's white identity in particular. To illustrate this shift, I will provide some background and then more journal excerpts from later in my data collection process.

As I noted earlier, one of my research sites was a small non-profit organization, a community foundation. At the time of my research, I was a volunteer with the organization. I sat on the committee which made decisions about which organizations to fund. As part of my research, I acted as an 'observant participant' (Torbert, 1991, p. 228) on the committee through one four-month funding cycle. I taped our meetings and wrote about them in my journal. Here I provide some extended excerpts. I am writing about the last meeting of the funding cycle in which the committee had to come to consensus on some proposals about which we had disagreed earlier. The committee had ten members: three were white; three were Asian, two were black and two were Latina.

In my journal, I wrote about how I acted differently in this meeting than I had in previous meetings. In the past I would often support groups even if I thought they were ineffective or did not meet one of the foundation's guidelines, which is to do organizing and advocacy work as opposed to social service work. I would vote for them for two reasons: they met other guidelines of the foundation and they were run either by women of color or poor women and I felt, as a

white, middle-class woman, I shouldn't judge them. However, in the meeting that I describe below, I spoke and voted against several proposals, even though I was often the lone dissenter.

Here I give an excerpt from a conversation I had with another committee member, Tien, a Vietnamese-American, during a break after the decision making was completed. (I had taped and transcribed this conversation as part of my data collection.) Tien had just said that social service could be seen as a form of organizing, especially in immigrant-based organizations.

Erica: I've generally accepted that and voted for these organizations and I think tonight, for whatever reasons, I just decided that I can't do it anymore. It's not organizing. To me, it's a rationalization.

Tien: I've worked with a lot of immigrant or refugee communities. I feel like I'm imposing my criteria of organizing or even social change on a group of people that may not see it the way I see it. But I've come to accept the fact that there are different ways of organizing.

Erica: That's a very powerful argument, when you say you don't want to impose your standards. That's very hard for me to rebut . . . But what I realize I've been doing is – I've been trained as an organizer, I've learned basic principles of organizing and I really believe them, I really believe them, and then I feel like I'm not listening to what my own training was.

Tien: Don't take this to offense, but that's your time, your environment. Other groups may not have the same environment, same thinking. A lot of organizing is a western, imperialist, logic model, a-b-c-d and boom, outcomes.

My journal then picks up after this excerpt:

We went back to the meeting and finished up. After the meeting was over, I talked to Tien a little bit about the [previous] conversation . . . I said to Tien that it was something I took seriously, that I felt that someone in my particular social location has to be particularly careful about this stuff and has to really scrutinize our judgments and try to figure out where we might be imposing things that are inappropriate, but I also said there are times when I have to rely on my own judgment and I believe that this is one of those times . . .

I'm just thinking – who knows how long this will last – I feel like as opposed to being caught on the horns of that cultural relativism dilemma, I think I'm starting to ground my feet back into what are some of the things that I know. And I feel like this is actually something I feel like I know, something I feel pretty competent at. I know what makes organizations successful, I know what makes organizing successful; I'm tired of pretending that I don't know that. You know, I'm tired of pretending that. And there can be variations, but there are certain fundamental principles . . . I'm just not going to vote for programs that I think are poorly run just because they're run by people of color and I'm white and I'm not going to pass judgment on them. I'm not going to do that anymore.

[Later I added this piece.] Having now thought about this more over the last two weeks, I think I'm getting at something very important here. Perhaps I can feel more positive about claiming whiteness as a more positive whiteness emerges for me. If whiteness is all negative, if it's all something I need to scrutinize and mistrust and be suspicious of because it's going to lead me to impose my white ways of doing things on people, then 1) I'm not going to want to claim it and 2) I'm not going to feel like I have a lot of authority or credibility for thinking about how to change things. If I can see part of my heritage as positive, then I'm more likely to claim it, and, more importantly, use it as leverage for change, have something to add to the dialogue.

I'm not so sure that my understanding of organizing is particularly 'white' – I think of the civil rights movement as a strong influence, for example, and the United Farm Workers. But even if it were largely influenced by largely white movements – the labor movement, the student and anti-war movements, community organizing – it's still a good legacy and is something that white folks can add to the mix. Rather than doubting it for that reason, let's see it as one of the very positive contributions we can make. This is related to what I wrote earlier about white people having to take responsibility for changing things, not absolving themselves of responsibility. That's much easier to do if we can draw from parts of our heritage that we feel good about. But things that are seen as 'white' then can't be automatically dismissed, because if they are, then whites don't have much to contribute to the conversation.

As I noted earlier, these excerpts indicate to me that I had changed over the course of my data collection. At the time of that last excerpt, I had become more confident about my judgment, less fearful that my instincts couldn't be trusted because I am blinded by racism or ethnocentrism. I also, as the Autonomy stage would suggest, was trying to figure out how to create and claim a positive white identity. I was beginning to realize that if I don't bring my own judgment, then I bring nothing.

My thinking on this was also influenced by Frankenberg (1993) who describes two kinds of 'race cognizant' discourses that she found in her sample of white women. Both discourses recognize that black inequality and white privilege are structured into American society. They vary, however, in their response to that awareness. The first kind, held mostly by Frankenberg's younger interviewees, is characterized by angst, paralysis and shame. Whiteness is an original sin; there is little that can be done to address racism. The second discourse, articulated by several older women who were long-time activists in movements of people of color in the United States and South Africa, finds a way out of the paralysis. These women advocated political activism as the best way to address white complicity and said that their practice was more important than their identity: I didn't choose who I am, but I can choose what to do with it. This view demands not only a lot of whites, but of people of color: both groups must have patience and compassion for others on the journey. Nor does it grant automatic authority to people of color. As the epigram at the beginning of this

chapter states, whites have to find their own ground, claim their own voice, on race.

Another journal excerpt at the very end of the data collection process again illustrates my shift.

I'm not saying I'm not going to continue to make mistakes, that my understanding won't be limited, that I've shed the blinders that come with my social position and my own personal emotional make-up. But I'm no longer worried that some kind of ugly, festering racism will somehow leak out and show me up . . . I think my greater sense of comfort comes from actually participating in a multi-cultural group [the community foundation] and from interviews with such a wide range of people of color, who were all willing to give me enough of the benefit of the doubt to have a long conversation with me . . . I no longer feel like quite the fake that I started out. So, this is something pretty profound that's been influenced by the dissertation process.

Spurring the change

How did the research spur the change? Not surprisingly, given the premise of my dissertation, I believe interactions with others were central. All my interviews were lengthy, intensive interactions and many had an impact. But two encounters I described earlier in this article were particularly significant. In one of my journal excerpts, I noted my interview with Latifa, an African American woman who was critical of the white male head of the Diversity Committee at one of the research sites. She was frustrated that he would refer to himself as 'just a white guy' who didn't really know what he was doing. Her statement immediately struck me since I could imagine myself saying the same thing. While I didn't understand her frustration in the moment, it stayed with me and I've reflected on it many times. It has become a touchstone in my understanding of whites' responsibility for taking a stand and taking action. Similarly, Sarah's statement that she wished she could develop friendships with white women and my response about my lack of friendships with women of color – that single exchange – melted away some of my fear and uncertainty about my relationships with women of color. Her simple expression of desire for such friendships, coming as it did after a long conversation with me, gave me hope and validation.

So, I believe my identity shift arose from a series of experiences like these. Also crucial to that process was my sense-making as I grappled with these issues in my journal. Because of the journal, I wrote down a lot of the fearful, hard-to-hear thoughts that I'd had over the years about race. While seeing those words on the printed page was painful, it also somehow diminished their power. They were no longer haunting the edges of my consciousness, terrifyingly large in their vagueness. It is hard to challenge miasma. Turning and facing the thoughts squarely contained them. Journal-writing also required that I write down, and

make more concrete, some of my new, incipient explorations and understandings. Seeing them on the page, paradoxically, gave them more power, more weight. I gained confidence from those glimmerings; I could feel something stirring and growing. Over and over, I had the image of cleaning out a dank, fetid space: throwing open the doors and windows and letting in the light. Just that act alone was such a relief and made such a difference. And, the light clarified my own particular stance on race which was just beginning to emerge from the recesses.

Race, learning and voice

Since finishing my dissertation, I've become particularly interested in the intersection of learning and race. What enables learning from race? What enables learning in racially diverse groups? Does learning about race look different from learning about other kinds of differences? While my work in this area has been influenced by work on individual, team and organizational learning (Argote, Gruenfeld & Naquin, 2001; Argyris & Schon, 1996; A. Edmondson, 1999), as well as recent work on learning and diversity (Ely & Thomas, 2001), it was also informed by my dissertation data collection, how it changed me, and my exploration of the experience in my writing.

Race is an ongoing topic of conversation in American society, but that conversation rarely includes whites reflecting on their experience of race (Frankenberg, 1993). (A significant exception is the collection of essays in Clark & O'Donnell [1999].) In my experience, both as a white person and as an interviewer of white people, whites often simply don't know how to talk about race. That is because many of us, unlike people of color, can live our lives without having to explicitly think about race – and we have a vague sense that if we did think about it, we might not like what we think. It is also because some of us are very worried we will say the wrong thing if we do talk about race. We might inadvertently reveal prejudice or racism, fear or discomfort – we might make a terrible mistake. Such concerns create an absolutely chilling atmosphere when it comes to exploring race.

Researchers have long pointed to the role of mistakes and failure in learning (Sitkin, 1992) and to the importance of how mistakes are framed (Edmondson, Bohmer & Pisano, 2001). The action science discipline (Argyris, Putnam & Smith, 1985; Argyris & Schon, 1974, 1996) argues that errors must be framed as an essential part of the learning process. If we don't make mistakes, we're not taking risks, we're not growing, we're not developing. It acknowledges, however, that while this is a common espoused theory, it is less likely to be an individual's theory-in-use. In fact, a much more common theory-in-use is that one is 'wrong for being wrong' (Argyris et al., 1985, p. 287) and that errors are

‘crimes to be covered up or prosecuted’ (p. 280). When this theory-in-use is in effect, it is impossible to learn.

This theory-in-use is common among many whites who might have some interest in addressing race, but feel at a loss about how to start. It was certainly how I felt. For years I simply felt ashamed of my own fears and discomforts – felt strongly that I was ‘wrong for being wrong’ – and so I did cover them up, to the best of my ability. That stymied any possibility of learning about race. It was only when I faced and explored my feelings and experiences that I could change them instead of sit on them. If something is an undiscussable, how can anyone claim a voice? Undiscussables not only silence voices, they quash incipient attempts to find one. I had to make race discussable for myself in order to start the process of learning so that I would eventually have something to say on the matter.

I am now trying to make these issues more broadly discussable. That is why I choose to write so personally and intimately about a charged subject. I do so because I believe it has been crucial in helping me come to terms with my own identity and because I think it could be of interest to other whites struggling with their racial identity. I also do it because it is central to learning from and about race. For whites to truly engage with people of color in a collective learning process they must have something to contribute to the conversation; they cannot abdicate the responsibility to have knowledge or wisdom. In other words, as the epigraph to this article states, they must claim a voice. I offer my story as one pathway to claiming a voice: reflecting on one’s own experiences, surfacing uncomfortable thoughts and feelings, facing them squarely, and gleaned new understandings. I also offer it as a work-in-progress: I continue to wrestle with my identity, my voice and my role as a white person. But I do so with a basic sense of being in the right territory and asking some important questions.

This article explores the mutual, cross-flowing influence of research and identity. It suggests that our identities are expressed and shaped through our research and that our research is shot through with vestiges of our identities. Research and identity reverberate through each other, affording both caution and promise. Caution, in that researchers should be mindful of how our identities are present in every aspect of our work. Promise, in that such awareness can lead to new insights about ourselves, our areas of inquiry, and the world we both inhabit and shape.

Appendix: follow-up email message to informants

Thank you again for participating in my research. I really enjoyed meeting you. As I mentioned, it would be very helpful for me to get your reflections on the experience of the interview. These reflections are important in two ways. First, they help me refine my approach in further interviews. Second, they are an impor-

tant source of data for my research, just like your responses to my questions in the interview.

If you could take a few minutes to answer these questions, I would really appreciate it. Please answer honestly – don't worry about sparing my feelings! It's very important for me to get a genuine sense of how interviewees are reacting to the interview process.

Just email your responses back to me. Thank you very much.

- 1 Right after we finished the interview, how did you feel?
- 2 Having had some time to reflect on the interview, how do you feel about it now?
- 3 Was there anything that made you feel uncomfortable or awkward during the interview?
- 4 Is there anything you've thought of recently in response to my interview questions that you'd like to add?
- 5 One of the things I'm most interested in is how people react to being questioned by someone who is a stranger and may have a different background from them (in terms of life experience, race, gender, education, whatever). What was that experience like for you? Did your feelings change from before to during to after the interview?

Notes

- 1 When writing about racial identity, all authors have to decide whether to capitalize the terms 'white' and 'black' when referring to race. There are several different models. Some, like Cox (1994), capitalize both terms. Others, including Frankenberg (1993) and Thompson (2001) capitalize Black but leave white uncapitalized. Still others leave both terms uncapitalized (Bell & Nkomo, 2001; Omi & Winant, 1994). While it may seem like a small issue, in fact whether or not to capitalize can suggest something about how the author conceptualizes race. I have chosen to leave both terms uncapitalized. Capitalizing has a flavor, to me, of essentializing race, giving it an impermeable solidity and status, which contradicts its socially constructed nature. However, others who also see race as socially constructed have chosen to capitalize one or both categories (Frankenberg is one example), so I am not arguing that capitalizing is wrong, only that it doesn't reflect my own personal stance.
- 2 All names are pseudonyms.
- 3 See the appendix for the actual e-mail message and questions.
- 4 Helms's model has been critiqued for being linear, static and ahistorical (Tatum, 1999; Thompson, 1999). I cannot speak to the generalizability of Helms's framework, only that it was quite useful in illuminating my own experience.

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