

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The Color-Blind Double Bind: Whiteness and the (Im)Possibility of Dialogue

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This essay affirms the position of a politically responsive constructionist theory of communication (PRCT) in arguing that radical encounters with otherness are critical to the dialogic project (S. Deetz & J. Simpson, 2004). It also engages M. McPhail's (2004) critique that White racism and the blinders it produces significantly and perhaps irreparably inhibit the possibility of meaningful dialogue about race across the "color line" (W. E. B. DuBois, 1903). This article examines the viability of the PRCT model as it applies specifically to the possibility of dialogue across racial lines and argues that discourses of "color blindness" hinder, rather than advance, dialogue about race in the United States. Illustrations from efforts of one university campus to foster dialogue and to build a welcoming and diverse community illustrate subtle and not-so-subtle ways in which a color-blind stance can narrow the discursive space in which interracial dialogue might occur.

doi:10.1111/j.1468-2885.2007.00317.x

Dialogue at its best is an interaction among people that produces something greater than the sum of its parts and leaves participants changed by that interaction (Bakhtin, 1981; Boal, 1985; Bohm, 1996; Buber, 1973; Deetz & Simpson, 2004; Ellinor & Gerard, 1998; Gergen, McNamee, & Barrett, 2001; Habermas, 1989; Levinas, 1987; Pearce, 2002). From the Greek *dialogos*, dialogue is, literally, the act of thinking together (Isaacs, 1999). Many great thinkers have added to our understanding of dialogue: what it is, how it is achieved, and why it is important. Always, these thinkers and their theories have been shaped by their own histories and the social and political contexts that shaped their lives. Bakhtin was changed by the upheavals of the Russian Revolution; Buber, Bohm, Habermas, and Levinas sought to respond to the oppressions, inequities, and moral dilemmas of World War II; Boal and Freire developed their work in response to the political turmoil and social inequalities of Brazil in the early 20th century. Of course, contemporary theorists are likewise influenced by our histories. As West notes: "Dialogue is a form of struggle; it's not chitchat" (Lerner &

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West, 1996, p. 266). Dialogue exists as a potential in every interaction to “think together” with others to create richer and more complete knowledge. When this potential is missed or left unrealized, we reinforce and reproduce partial and incomplete truths about the world.

Deetz and Simpson (2004) developed a politically responsive constructionist theory of communication (PRCT) as a theory of dialogue that recognizes the importance of political situatedness, affirms that “radical encounters with otherness” are critical to the dialogic project, and suggests that meaningful engagements across difference hold greater transformative potential than those that focus primarily or exclusively on “finding common ground.” Many of our most pressing issues today might benefit from engaging deeply and meaningfully across differences: Religious sectarianism divides many of the world’s people, political polarization remains pervasive, and all over the world, people remain divided by class and gender. In the United States and elsewhere, what DuBois (1903) termed the “color line” also persists. In the shadows of Rodney King, O. J. Simpson, David Duke, Timothy McVeigh, gang warfare, welfare reform, Hurricane Katrina, and other issues that were simultaneously “not about race” and that deepened divisions along racial lines, we have collectively struggled to engage meaningfully in mixed racial company. McPhail (2004) suggests that truly transformative dialogue about race may be impossible. He argues that White racism and the blinders it produces significantly and perhaps irreparably inhibit the possibility of meaningful interracial dialogue about race. Furthermore, he critiques European-American scholars of dialogue, suggesting that although we theorize and philosophize about the “transformative power” of dialogue, we also fail to examine critically how Whiteness and the discourses it engenders may inhibit that very transformation:

Discussions of race by European American scholars writing on dialogue are limited in scope and focus ... [and] there is little consideration of the ways in which racial consciousness undermines and limits dialogic interaction. Although much of the scholarship on dialogue produced by scholars of European descent focuses on the theoretical and philosophical dimensions of dialogue’s transformative potential, there is no sustained and explicit exploration of how that potential is made impossible by White racism. (p. 223)

This article examines the usefulness of a PRCT as it applies specifically to the possibility of dialogue across racial lines and argues that discourses of “color blindness” hinder, rather than advance, dialogue about race in the United States. I begin by exploring the discursive context for dialogue and the constraints that a discourse of color blindness places on it. Then, illustrations from the efforts of one university campus to foster dialogue and to build a welcoming and diverse community illustrate subtle and not-so-subtle ways in which a color-blind stance can narrow the discursive space in which meaningful interracial dialogue might emerge.

The language that defines us: Politically responsive constructionism and color blindness

This essay accepts the social constructionists' position that language not only describes reality but also shapes and defines how we understand our world (Berger & Luckman, 1966; Gergen, 2001) and that those with the power to define language shape and constrain the discursive space in which persons make sense of social experience (hooks, 1984; Moore, 1976; Spender, 1985, 1989). I begin by discussing and defining some key terms.

Dialogue at its most powerful is the opportunity or potential that exists in any interaction to challenge a previously held belief by "thinking together" with others to deepen shared understanding or meaning. In this sense, dialogue does not reside in "events" that happen but in opportunities realized in interaction. I use the term *race* to describe the socially ascribed identification of an individual with a group whose history has been shaped by its treatment on the basis of appearance or ancestry rather than as a set of genetically given characteristics (see Crenshaw, 1997). This is important because, as Young (2000) explains in her discussion of a "politics of difference," the *color-blind* stance that suggests that everyone is a unique individual and that skin color and racial or ethnic identities are not salient markers of lived experience reinforces a belief that all privileges are earned and that ill fortune results from personal failings. As she says:

People speak and act as though social groups are real. ... These social group designations have serious consequences for people's relative privilege or disadvantage. ... Oppressed groups found that this [color-blind] humanist ideology [that people are "just people"] resulted in ignoring rather than transcending the real material consequences of social group difference, often forcing some people to devalue their own particular cultural styles and forms of life because they did not fit the allegedly neutral mainstream.
(Young, 2000, p. 112)

Racism, then, is used not only to describe overt acts of discrimination or bias based on race (what I call *blatant racism*) but rather to indicate a system in which a group or groups of people enjoy enduring advantages as a result of historic disadvantages to another group or groups of people because of racial identification.

In the United States, *Whiteness* has been a historically privileged category insofar as people with white or light skin have benefited from historic legal, social, and economic advantages that shape a common history and have resulted in long-term inequities in the distribution of income, property, and power that persist to this day (Jensen, 2003; Kirschenman & Neckerman, 2003; Lamberth, 2003; Lipsitz, 2003; Wilson, 2003). To be sure, as with other racial categories, "Whiteness" has not remained stable over time (Omi & Winant, 1986; Sacks, 2003), and not all people with light skin are equally advantaged (Hartigan, 1997; Roediger, 1995). Nevertheless, it remains true that in the United States today people who are fair-skinned see

people who look like themselves disproportionately represented in power and leadership positions and are more likely to be assumed to be competent and productive, to have their existence assumed to be racially neutral, and therefore to enjoy the many benefits of *white skin privilege* (see McIntosh, 1988), including experiencing race or ethnicity as an “optional” identity (Waters, 2003).

This uneven distribution of power and resources lies at the core of a system that perpetuates *White supremacy* (hooks, 1995; Lipsitz, 1995). Although the term may conjure images of violent bigotry (blatant racism), White supremacy operates both subtly and perniciously within the more complex social or systemic notion of racism. By treating Whiteness as “normal, neutral, and normative” (McIntosh, 1988), the histories, traditions, languages, cultures, values, and aesthetics of a wide range of people are dismissed and devalued as inferior to those of the “norm” (see also Jensen, 2003). Furthermore, members of dominant social groups are rarely required to operate outside of the dominant cultural script and therefore can function adaptively even from a monocultural lens. As McIntosh describes:

As a White person, I realized I had been taught about racism as something that puts others at a disadvantage, but had been taught not to see one of its corollary aspects, White privilege, which puts me at an advantage. ... [W]hite privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools, and blank checks. Describing White privilege makes one newly accountable. ... I was taught to see myself as an individual whose moral state depended on her individual moral will. ... [W]hites are taught to think of their lives as morally neutral, normative, and average, and also ideal, so that when we work to benefit others, this is seen as work that will allow “them” to be more like “us.” (p. 1)

A discourse of color blindness perpetuates a system of thought in which White ways of being, knowing, and experiencing are “morally neutral, normative, average, and ideal.” This position denies and devalues the lived experience of many people of color and provides no space or mechanism for those perspectives and experiences to meaningfully inform a collective understanding of our social world.

This makes *color blindness* an ally to White supremacy: By dismissing the difference in lived experience of White people and people of color as an irrelevant distinction, it upholds and affirms dominant ways of being, knowing, and doing at the expense of alternatives. Furthermore, the socially dominant position of Whiteness enables discourses of color blindness to be challenged only with great difficulty. In an ironic twist, arguments against color blindness are sometimes dismissed as racist because they foreground difference over similarity.

In this article, I argue that such a stance gets in the way of meaningful dialogue. From a PRCT orientation, dialogue can be transformational only when participants are engaged in *productive* communication; that is, they are creating (producing) something new in the interaction between them. Dialogue from this perspective does not require special spaces or places to occur; it is a potential that can be realized or

missed in every interaction. When discourses of color blindness are invoked to discredit or dismiss the lived experiences of people of color as invalid, inaccurate, or irrelevant, the interaction can only be *reproductive* of color-blind beliefs. Because this stance also privileges the socially dominant position as correct and valid, it precludes a space where the status quo can be challenged and, thus, is fundamentally antidialogic.

Color blindness is a particular ailment of White society (Allen, 1996; Harding, 1991, 1992; McIntosh, 1988). Whereas people of color often experience that race matters in their day-to-day existence (Allen, 2004; West, 1993), because of the privileges of Whiteness (Jensen, 2003; McIntosh, 1988), many European Americans can legitimately claim not to see racism at play in their lives. A discourse of color blindness may arise from the well-intended notion that “all people are created equal,” but it nevertheless minimizes the persistent importance of race in its effort to “move beyond” racism. The problem with this position is that it begins from a predominantly White experience of the world in which race is perceived not to influence our lived experience and negates the experience of people for whom race still matters very much. This narrows rather than expands the discursive space in which “radical encounters with otherness” might enable dialogic transformation to occur (Deetz & Simpson, 2004).

Politically responsive constructionism expanded

PRCT is historically situated, sensitive and responsive to social and political issues, and productive rather than reproductive. It recognizes the generative power of language not only to reflect but also to actively shape our world and so carries with it an ethical responsibility to engage meaningfully with the multiple, contingent, and diverse narratives that arise from and give meaning to our collective experience. This dialogic theory of communication is offered as a more powerful alternative to the “PC” or politically correct discourses of the 1990s that paid homage to diversity by carefully choosing language so as not to offend and in so doing narrowed the possibilities for conflict, disagreement, or difference to emerge. Where PC discourses favor politeness over substantive engagement, PRCT demands that otherness, conflict, and difference be engaged in a way that opens possibilities for mutual redefinition *and* that this process be undergirded by an ethic of care (Gilligan, 1982). Adopting this theoretical lens shapes our understanding of dialogue, moving us beyond colloquial understandings of polite talk and beyond humanistic quests for common ground. Table 1 highlights some of the key features of dialogue that follow from a politically responsive constructionist lens.

As Deetz and Simpson (2004) have argued, dialogue, and the transformative potential it holds, is realized in moments when people experience “radical encounters with otherness” in which their own beliefs, assumptions, and taken-for-granted understandings of the world are called into question through juxtaposition with perspectives and experiences fundamentally different from their own. A discourse of color blindness imposes a colorless interpretation on the world, denying the

Table 1 Features of Dialogue from a Politically Responsive Constructionist Lens

Dialogue Is	Dialogue Is Not
Historically situated	Hypothetical or acontextual
Productive	Reproductive
Engaging	Passive
Empowering	Demeaning
Transformative	Satisfied with the status quo
About exploring different perspectives	About being “right”
Politically responsive	“Politically correct”

possibility of a wide range of experiences entering into public discourse and undermining the potential for dialogue. As Freire (1970/1973) suggests:

Dialogue is the encounter between men mediated by the world, in order to name the world. Hence dialogue cannot occur between those who want to name the world and those who do not wish this naming—between those who deny other men the right to speak their word and those whose right to speak has been denied them. (pp. 76–77).

Thus, as McPhail (2004) contends, genuine dialogue about race in America remains elusive because people of color have been systematically denied agency in defining their own experience of “speaking their word” about the lived experience of racism. A discourse of color blindness, therefore, narrows rather than expands the discursive field in which dialogue can unfold. Color blindness fails to meet the tests for dialogue set out in Table 1 because it:

- is *hypothetical and acontextual* insofar as it imagines a race-neutral social context.
- is *reproductive* of the lived experience of dominant groups over subordinated ones.
- *passively accepts the status quo* and resists challenges to it.
- *demeans and devalues* the experience of racism as irrelevant or inaccurate.
- is “*politically correct*” in its avoidance of difficult or challenging explorations of race.

As Harding (1992), Allen (1996), and other standpoint theorists suggest, our standpoint or social location shapes and influences perception. Marginalized people, because they must function both in their own cultural contexts and in dominant cultural realms, must be bi- or multicultural, but as we saw above, the converse is not necessarily true.¹ Nakayama and Krizek (1995) aptly note that the ability to reduce Whiteness to nothing more than the color of one’s skin or to suggest that “I don’t agree with using ethnic terms. I’m an American and that’s all” (p. 301) are the very acts that construct the “discursive space of White” (p. 291). If we are to recover a space conducive to substantive engagement across difference, we need to move beyond individual and relative standpoints and craft a dialogic stance that seeks out,

surfaces, and meaningfully engages alternative perspectives and competing discourses. As Goetz (1991) suggests:

We have to agree to a process of mutual naming, a process which will forbid the romanticization of partial perspectives. ... [E]ach claim to knowledge must be recognized, and must recognize itself, as partial, situated, and local. ... And it is precisely because of the knower's partiality that she will be able to see with others without claiming to be them, or forcing them to see her way.
(pp. 149–151)

What follows is an examination of one university's efforts to "build community" and "foster diversity." Because the "radical encounters with otherness" that are at the core of dialogic potential may happen anywhere, at any time, I focus my examples not on formal "dialogues" or structured spaces but on the everyday interactions and sense-making processes that shape the discursive field in which dialogue becomes possible or falters. We see below how discourses of color blindness narrow the field in which dialogue about race and racism might productively occur.

Data collection and analysis

The data described here were collected over 33 months of Human Research Committee–approved in-depth fieldwork at the University of Colorado at Boulder (CU). This study analyzed organizational cultural practices that supported or hindered the simultaneous building of community (an approach often surrounded by discourses of similarity and common ground) and fostering of diversity (and its attendant discourses of celebration of unique histories and contributions). Fieldwork included participant observation and recording of meetings of the campus Building Community Campaign, conducting interviews, and analyzing volumes of documents.

Collection

I recorded 23 hours of conversation over 19 meetings with members of the Building Community Campaign and conducted 20 in-depth interviews, which ranged in length from 30 to 90 minutes, with members of the campaign, top administrators, and a cross-section of students, faculty, and staff who represented many different races, ethnicities, genders, sexual orientations, and positions of institutional privilege. I also gathered and examined approximately 500 pages of organizational documents, institutional surveys, newspaper articles, and personal communication. I transcribed six of the recorded meetings in their entirety; the other 13 recordings were used to add richness (and verbatim quotations) to fieldnotes of those meetings. In addition to recorded meetings, the interviews enabled me to test themes that emerged from my preliminary analyses of my fieldnotes, meeting transcripts, and documents. I used a targeted approach to select interview participants, seeking out individuals with and without formal decision-making authority, across faculty, staff, student (graduate and undergraduate), and administrative ranks. I also used

opportunistic and snowball sampling methods to ensure that a diverse cross-section of community members were included along lines of race, gender, sexual orientation, age, and socioeconomic status. I transcribed the 20 interviews in their entirety, resulting in approximately 350 pages of single-spaced transcribed pages. In total, I acquired approximately 1,100 pages of data, enabling an inductive approach to the research analysis and allowing key themes to emerge from the data.

Analysis

From the beginning of this study, I collected and analyzed institutional documents and developed potential analytic categories in a process informed by Glaser and Strauss's (1967) *constant comparative method*. In order to compensate for potential bias in researcher interpretation, I used multiple methods to reflexively engage co-participants in this constant comparative process and checked emerging themes and categories with participants. I also used multiple, and at times conflicting, voices in my reporting as one strategy for developing knowledge claims.

This project did not begin as an analysis of dialogue; rather, as interpersonal and organizational messages about "community" and "diversity" were examined, substantial evidence emerged that when a color-blind stance was adopted, the discursive field was narrowed and constrained in ways that precluded "radical encounters with otherness" and reproduced extant beliefs about race and race relations. The following section offers several examples to illustrate the particular challenges this presents for the possibility of dialogue across race.

The color-blind double bind: Building community *and* celebrating diversity

In the spring of 1998, CU was the site of a series of racially charged incidents involving graffiti, hate mail, and a very public series of letters to the editor in both the city and campus-focused (though privately owned) newspapers. At the time, the university was actively involved in rewriting its campus diversity plan amidst a conservative political climate in which affirmative action was being reevaluated as a tool to foster diversity. As a result of the ongoing campus strife and as an extension of in-progress campus conversations concerned with promoting "civility" on campus, a group of students, staff, and a small number of faculty formed what became a "Building Community Campaign." Conscious from the outset of the challenges of simultaneously building community and fostering diversity, the Building Community Campaign went beyond simple notions of "finding common ground" and "celebrating similarities" in actively striving to promote a campus climate in which the community thrives *because of* its diversity. Its statement of purpose reads:

The Building Community Campaign works to promote and support efforts on campus that increase awareness, promote inclusion, foster dialogue, respond to challenging or conflictual situations, and recognize the efforts of individuals

and groups who help to make CU a more open, welcoming, and supportive environment for everyone.

Nevertheless, in the years since its inception, the Building Community Campaign and the CU campus have faced ongoing challenges and provided sobering examples of the ways in which Whiteness and its attendant discourse of color blindness can narrow the context for dialogue across race.

Whiteness in the way

As the excerpt from McIntosh (1988) describes, Whiteness is a state of being that carries with it many attendant privileges and yet is also cloaked in a discourse of normalcy such that attitudes, behaviors, experiences, cultural norms, and taboos that are more reflective of the experience of European Americans become generalized and accepted as normal, natural, right, and just. Critical race theorists have called this the ordinariness of racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000, 2001) in an attempt to challenge the notion that racism exists only in blatant and overt acts of hatred, intolerance, or injustice. This simultaneous pervasiveness and invisibility makes it difficult for many people who enjoy white skin privilege to recognize their experience as a racialized experience. As Jackson (1999) remarks: "There are those who may not consciously consider themselves to be privileged, nor would they imagine that their mere existence has somehow been calculated as the factor which declines privilege to Others" (p. 40). This presents very real obstacles to meaningful dialogue across racial lines.

In the course of this research project, I repeatedly encountered people who were committed to the idea of diversity and to creating a more "welcoming and open community." Even so, most of my collaborators in this research project also identified CU as an environment that was still falling short of this ideal. When I asked Ella,² an influential African-American administrator who had been involved with the Building Community Campaign from its inception, what she believed stood in the way of realizing a campus climate in which people united in celebration of diversity, she replied:

Being willing to be uncomfortable and realizing that there's a certain amount of conflict when you say "we can be different" and we need to recognize that we have different needs and beliefs. ... To me, when you ignore, minimize, try to explain away issues and concerns and not take joint responsibility, that's in the way.

For many of the people of color with whom I spoke, this theme of discomfort emerged repeatedly. Frustrations among populations of color mounted when members of the dominant White culture downplayed or avoided the conflict and discomfort of engaging meaningfully with and recognizing material differences in lived experience between racial groups on campus. Students of color indicated feeling that the notions of diversity that were part of the "package" of public discourse on campus were diluted to the point of meaninglessness. Sumaya, an American of

Southeast Asian descent, described her first encounters with diversity on campus like this:

When I applied to CU, I think I always thought of CU as being a diverse school. I just always got that impression. I don't know if that was from the literature or whatever, [but] I remember the approach ... that was taken at [new student] orientation around diversity. I think it was the chancellor, or the vice chancellor, was talking about diversity and they asked all the students that were wearing Nike shoes to stand up and all the students that were wearing Reebok shoes to stand up and that's how they addressed diversity at orientation and so that was my first impression with CU.

If we accept that dialogue is not an event that succeeds or fails but a potential that is realized or missed in every interaction, we begin to see how experiences like this one can minimize and trivialize the still very different lived experiences of people of color. When new-student orientation sessions address diversity by talking about the choice of shoes we wear,³ space to explore dialogically the persistent impact of social and historical inequity shrinks.

When I interviewed Jackson, an African-American student, he had been at CU for 3 years and was highly involved in community-building and diversity efforts on campus. During our conversation, he described how race became immediately visible to him within hours of arriving on campus the week before school started in the first semester of his freshman year. After getting his class schedule, he met up with a friend to compare classes. As his friend left, Jackson realized that he no longer had his schedule. He described the following encounter as he chased after his friend to retrieve the schedule:

I went jogging, running after [my friend], and on that particular day, I neglected to wear a belt and, you know the kids, they're into that baggy sort of stuff, so that's what I was wearing. So my britches, as it were, they were kind of not cooperating, so I was running, tugging at my britches, and trying to not be indecent in public, and I ran by this guy and he was like, "Well, how are you going to run from the police with your pants falling down like that?" and at the time, it didn't even register. I just like kept going and, you know, I caught up with my friend and got my schedule, but like later on that evening, it dawned on me. It was like, wow what was that about? What's the deal? And so, that was kind of like a little bit of a smack in the face and like a wake-up call I suppose, too.

According to PRCT, the opportunity for dialogue is realized when our taken-for-granted scripts are broken and we see and experience an other more completely, thereby expanding our understanding of the world. In the example above, the potential for a dialogic encounter is missed, as a casual interaction reproduces dominant beliefs about race for *both* Jackson and the person who characterized him stereotypically.

At CU, example after example illustrates that the experience of students of color is different in substantive ways from that of White students. A 1998 study of the campus climate at CU indicated that African-American students reported lower levels of satisfaction with their campus experience as well as feeling lower levels of acceptance, welcome, and support than were reported by all other ethnic groups. The summary report for this survey indicates:

African American students generally report experiencing higher levels of stereotyping and prejudice, feeling less comfortable and welcome on campus and in Boulder, and generally experiencing a more negative time at CU-Boulder than do other groups. The pervasiveness and stability of this pattern indicates that this is a serious concern. (CU-Boulder Campus Climate Survey, Executive Summary, 1998, para. 5)

In their responses to a 1998 Campus Climate Survey, students of color repeatedly emphasize a feeling of isolation (“there aren’t many people you can relate to”; “I have not had one minority teacher”) and either a desire for their voice to be heard by Whites (“They all need to understand their lack of awareness helps to continually perpetuate racism”) or resignation (“don’t really care”). The White student responses, on the other hand, demonstrate both dismissal of the experience of students of color as not being welcome (“everyone seems to enjoy themselves and feel welcome”) and defensiveness about the need to make “a special effort” that

Table 2 Responses to the Question “What can, or should, be done to make the campus climate more open and welcoming for students of color?”

White Student Responses	Student of Color Responses
“I don’t know because from experience everyone seems to enjoy themselves and feels welcome.”	“How can you be welcome if there aren’t many people you can relate to?”
“CU puts so much emphasis on ethnicity these days that I’m beginning to feel like a minority.”	“In 5 years I have not had one minority teacher. This is part of the problem.”
“Nothing different—a special effort should not be made to make certain people feel welcome—they need to learn to do it for themselves.”	“Have the president talk with me. ... Have the chancellor talk with me. ... Re-educate faculty, staff, and students about their own lack of awareness on racial issues. They all need to understand their lack of awareness helps to continually perpetuate racism.”
“It seems that you have convocations for people and personally I think that should be enough. If you do any more it may be looked at as favoritism.”	“I don’t really care. I’m leaving.”

Note: From CU-Boulder Campus Climate Survey (1998).

might be construed as “favoritism.” These responses show how refusal or resistance of Whites to recognize or acknowledge the concerns and experiences of people of color as legitimate can make impossible the kinds of “radical encounters with otherness” called for by PRCT. The representative comments of students of color and their White counterparts displayed in Table 2 demonstrate the discursive chasm between them.

The impact of a color-blind stance becomes even more poignant when we look not only at the differential experience of students but also at the reports of faculty across racial lines. One of my interviewees, Bob, a White, male, tenured faculty member who also served on the university’s governing board, expressed his support for diversity in this way:

Come, be prepared to work hard, don’t expect any breaks because you’re a minority, because I think most people feel that you don’t get favors, you can’t create a separate set of standards because of what’s been disadvantaged. I came out of a home in which my father came to this country with only his suitcase and not knowing a word of English. He raised a family of six, even though he only had an eighth-grade education and worked with his hands all of his life. Every one of us got to go to college and some of us on to graduate school to be teachers and everything else, and we don’t see, I don’t see, the opportunity as being strikingly less for one African minority. Now, it’s true, I didn’t suffer overt discrimination as some of the Blacks have, some of the Chinese have, some of the Hispanics have, but I suffered religious discrimination as a Catholic in a very Protestant area ...

Remarks like these further illustrate the color-blind double bind. On the one hand, it is true that many classes of people have been disadvantaged and have had their own struggles to contend with. Yet, Jackson (1999) points to the pernicious effects of “justify[ing] White space by paradoxically suggesting that it is a privileged space, but that the space is open and shareable, due to the believed existence of social parity” (p. 48). When a White male professor, who embodies the trappings of power and privilege in an institution, declares his access and opportunity to be not “strikingly less” than for African Americans and challenges people of color to “come prepared to work hard” and to not “expect any breaks because you’re a minority” (thereby implying that people of color would not work hard or would expect “breaks”), it has a chilling effect on the potential for meaningful dialogue about the experience of race on campus.

Elena was also a tenured full professor and chair of an academic department when I interviewed her. As an Asian-American woman, she offered a perspective different from Bob’s:

When you’re on the margins, you’re on the outer rim, you’ve got to see everything towards the core. People in the core are powerful, have a lot of power, also have limited vision, because they don’t have to see out, see? They expect everybody to look to them. They don’t have to look out and this is what I

mean, that they may have power, but they have very, they have a much more serious case of myopia. Those of us who have less power have a much broader vision. We just don't have the power to do much with what we have....

This comment illustrates the importance of standpoint. From Bob's social location, he saw his efforts and his successes as moral virtues achieved through hard work and believed that in adopting a color-blind stance, he was being just and equitable, holding everyone to the same expectations. Rowe (2000) suggests that "such a cultural climate of avoidance thrives in silences on the topic of race because when we engage in such discussion, particularly with an emphasis on Whiteness, we begin to mark the strategically unstated norms of social interaction that enable White mobility" such as collegiality, teaching style, and style of intellectual inquiry (pp. 66–67). Elena reported many ways in which her voice and that of other students and faculty from marginalized groups were routinely diminished or set aside using seemingly value-neutral language:

The meritocracy. Who do you think created it and who set the standards for the meritocracy? Nobody even questions it, you know? Now that's not to say that people of color or minority faculty don't want standards. Of course we do. Everybody wants it. We all have pride in our work, but it's that we were never really asked when the standards were set, you know, how to set those standards.

This is how a color-blind stance functions to marginalize: By assuming that the experience of White people is natural and neutral, well-intentioned White people generalize their experience to that of people of color and work to create circumstances, as McIntosh (1988) suggests, "that will allow 'them' to be more like 'us'" (p. 1). The examples above illustrate how this generalization of White experience functions to diminish and dismiss the differences in lived experience for people of color and in so doing to shrink the discursive space available to experience radical encounters with otherness.

Below I offer one more example of how color-blind discourses can function to constrain speech: Although civility and civil discourse may be invoked to "create safe spaces" for dialogue, they can also limit time, place, and manner of speech in ways that favor reproductive interactions rather than productive dialogue.

Under the cloak of civility: Whiteness in disguise

Arnett and Arneson (1999) have proposed a model of dialogic civility as an appropriate and hopeful response to an environment besieged by cynicism. In their closing chapter, they propose "a narrative of dialogic civility that offers a commitment to keeping the conversation going in an age of diversity, change, and difference" (p. 282). In their model, civility becomes the guiding metaphor for interpersonal relationships in the public sphere. At its root, this argument seemingly calls for greater civic engagement across and between often-divided segments of society. The rules of politeness and niceties that fuse themselves connotatively to the metaphor of civility, however, may make it especially difficult for those whose voices are

already least heard to find a space in the public sphere. Borrowing from bell hooks, Moon (1999) argues that “the tyranny of *bourgeois decorum*” creates “safe spaces” in which “dominant ideologies go unchallenged, harmony is preserved,” thus functioning to silence dissenters (p. 183, emphasis added).

Like Arnett and Arneson (1999), Loeb (1999) also recognizes cynicism as a dilemma impeding robust civic involvement in contemporary society. His response to this dilemma, however, upholds the value of engagement for the sake of justice above engagement that maintains civility for its own sake. It is important to note that, in Loeb’s model, valuing justice above civility does not glorify incivility (or promote a discourse rooted in degrading, disparaging, or demeaning the other); rather, it recognizes that sometimes being nice is not in my best interest or in the interest of my broader community. Clearly, ad hominem attacks and inflammatory speech have the potential to foreclose the possibility of genuine dialogue, but a demand for speech that is respectful to the point of assenting to ideas and ideals that may do me greater harm may also inhibit genuine, much less radical, encounters with perspectives significantly different from my own. As Gresson (1995) suggests, the “recovery” of race in America must be a collective affair. Interpersonal politeness that precludes collective action can have a pernicious, even if unintended, effect. Having our most deeply held beliefs challenged and called into question may be uncomfortable. It is also the genesis of dialogue.

The dilemma of a discourse of civility is that an imperative for civil, cordial speech favors those already in positions of power because those who wish to alter the status quo must regulate and mediate their speech to satisfy the powerful. This is particularly problematic because those in positions of relative privilege and power can also decide when and with whom they choose to be civil. Research on community building on university campuses shows how insidiously this process can work and how even those with relative institutional power can be marginalized and disenfranchised by the social norms that govern appropriate speech (Simpson, 2001). We know, for instance, that one way that social norms may affect how we can say what we have to say is by structuring the language we have available to us (Cohn, 1997; Moore, 1976; Nakayama, 1997; Spender, 1985, 1989). When so many rules govern what can be said, how, and when, those with less access to cultural capital may self-censor to avoid “saying the wrong thing” or “putting their foot in their mouth.” Even those with greater relative power, however, can still suffer the effects of a limiting dialogic frame.

People of color who participated in my research often described being taught and cautioned from a young age to “not make waves” and to avoid saying things that would make members of dominant groups too uncomfortable. Elena, the Asian-American department chair we met above, suggests that these social rules and norms may, in fact, change when they benefit those with institutional power:

Now civility comes all of a sudden crashing down on us because we’re told that our manners are no good, you know? This is the thing that strikes me as amusing and also very sad, that is, usually, the very powerful people who have all kinds of

means to express themselves, who have never had to protect their freedom of speech and their right to be heard, right to speak, all of a sudden, they say "Civility. Civility. Wait a minute, you know, the rest of you have bad manners and so we're going to do the civility." So I can tell you for a fact that I'm very uncomfortable with the whole question of civility, not because I have a problem with good manners, my gosh, you know, if anything. I think it's the context in which the question is raised. It's easily framed as a cultural issue, but I don't think culture is neutral in an environment in which power is so unevenly distributed.

Elena highlights the ways in which social conditioning and structural inequality may influence whose voices are heard in organizational contexts. She argues that civility functions not to level the playing field or to ensure just or equitable treatment for all but rather to silence even further the already marginalized. The problem, again, is that when the manner and form of acceptable discourse are regulated by the powerful few, voice is inhibited.

The passage above also suggests that whose behaviors are interpreted as "civil" or "uncivil" is also a function of social location (Allen, Orbe, & Olivas, 1999; Bell, 1997; Dow, 1997; Nadesan, 1996). Elena believes that "the very powerful people who have all kinds of means to express themselves" need not have much concern for "civil discourse" but that when perspectives are offered that challenge those in positions of institutional power, those who hold power use a discussion of "manner of interaction" to shift the focus away from the content of those challenging arguments (thereby avoiding and making impossible radical encounters with otherness). The issue of who gets to make the rules that govern voice has deep implications for power relations and relative social locations in discursive contexts. Whose voice is able to say what and from which position is a function of already existing social locations. This should not, however, leave us without any hope of dialogic interaction or engagement. Rather, I hope that it promotes greater insight into and awareness of the ways in which the parameters we place on discourse inherently, and perhaps even inadvertently, favor some positions over others.

If we accept that dialogue exists as a potential to be realized in every interaction, then invoking civility to narrow or curtail speech about differential experiences of race can foreclose the opportunity to learn something new and to construct a more productive understanding of racialized experience together. This is not an argument against the value of civil behavior but a caution that *discourses* of civility can function in tandem with a discourse of color blindness to constrain the speech of those who would challenge the status quo. As we saw earlier with discourses of color blindness, the example above illustrates how discourses of civility can constrain the potential for dialogue around difficult racial issues. So, how can we engage otherness more meaningfully? Based on the experiences of these participants, I contend that acknowledging and naming the enduring privileges associated with Whiteness, and taking this responsibility seriously, are critical to realizing the transformative potential of dialogue about race in America.

Choosing new practices: Realizing the demand of otherness

Justice or civility

The critique that well-meaning White people do injustice to the cause of equality by favoring order over justice is not a new one. Consider King's (1963) famous "Letter from Birmingham Jail":

I must confess that over the past few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the white Citizen's Councilor or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to "order" than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice. ... Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection. (para. 23)

Written more than 40 years ago, this passage criticizes those "well-intentioned White people" who favor "order" (civility) over justice and whose (color-blind) belief that things will sort themselves out in time yields "shallow understanding."

If we operate from the generous presumption that many White people have employed a discourse of color blindness out of the belief that it was a just course of action and accept that the analysis above reveals instead its shortcomings, then several alternatives might suggest discursive strategies for engaging in a more productive dialogue about race. If dialogue is *historically situated*, then any alternative discourse must recognize the present lived experience of racism. In order to engage in productive, rather than reproductive conversation, we must collectively seek a more complex understanding of race and its persistent effects. If dialogue is an act of *empowerment*, then an alternative to color blindness must value the contribution all experience makes to understanding—even, and perhaps especially, when those experiences differ radically from our own. If dialogue is *transformative* and *about exploring different perspectives*, then any alternative discourse that emerges must be open to change and actively seek out experiences that might deepen awareness and cause *radical encounters with otherness*. Finally, if we seek a dialogic alternative to color blindness that is truly politically responsive, White people must engage with people of color and be willing to explore the enduring political and material consequences of racism. Adopting such alternatives has the potential to expand the discursive field and to increase the likelihood that the "radical encounters with otherness" required for transformational dialogue will occur.

A caveat

The above recommendations should not be taken to imply that such behavioral or conversational changes can or will come easily. In fact, the recommendations themselves present us with two very real dilemmas: First, they require White people to

engage in communicative behavior that may threaten simultaneously both their senses of self and their material power within the social order. Second, they presume that Whites would be willing and eager to make these changes if they understood the impact of their current communicative stance and the potential inherent in adopting a different one. M. McPhail (personal communication, October 1, 2006), however, questions the likelihood of such a possibility:

The argument against this possibility, however, is that racism is not simply a problem of misunderstanding or miseducation, but is in fact a pathology which undermines the ability of Whites to engage in the very practices called for. ... [O]ne of the most deeply held beliefs that White people have about themselves is that they are fair, open-minded, and objective, i.e. nonjudgmental, despite the enormous amount of historical evidence to the contrary. ... Thus, the colorblind double-bind might be characterized by the ability of Whites to view their behavior in relation to “others” positively regardless of what they are told by others, or by the material consequences of their behavior. In short, I believe that this is not simply a problem of miseducation that can be addressed by using alternative rhetorical strategies, but is a much more complicated psychological problem in which the principles of dialogue are simply appropriated by Whites in order to affirm their own positive sense of self.

In short, in setting aside color blindness, Whites must learn to see, accept, and experience their lives as raced and to explore the possibility that some of the good, ease, or rewards they have experienced have not been solely the result of hard work and just effort but of a system biased in their favor. This may not come easily to many, and perhaps it will prove impossible, but both my research and years of engaged practice facilitating dialogue suggest that standing on that ground and in that experience holds infinitely more potential for meaningful connection and transformation across racial lines than does a color-blind position.

Despite continued skepticism, McPhail (personal communication, October 1, 2006) also affirms my conviction that changing the context for dialogue about race depends in large part on the willingness and inclination of Whites to engage difference differently:

Ultimately, if situations like this are going to change, it will be based upon the willingness of White people of conscience to challenge such rationalizations, and while many Whites profess to being committed to diversity, justice, equality, and fairness, such claims are, in my opinion, rarely realized in behavior. ... Perhaps you will prove me wrong. I truly hope so.

If White scholars and others committed to “diversity, justice, equality, and fairness” are willing to take up this call, I suggest that stepping out of discourses of color blindness in favor of a discursive context that recognizes both the limitless human potential inherent in all people and the differential historical and material realities that persist on the basis of race is a critical starting point.

Conclusions

The first thing you do is to forget that I'm Black. Second, you must never forget that I'm Black.

—Parker (1999, p. 99)

Although people may hold equal potential at birth, the historical and material consequences of the lives they are born into are still consequential. A discourse of color blindness negates the importance of this experience. As long as a color-blind stance persists, the context for dialogue about race and racism will remain uneven and the narrowed potential for “radical encounters with otherness” to occur will limit its transformative potential. Dialogue occurs not only in auditoriums, at convocations, or in study circles. In fact, the kinds of encounters that truly transcend our commonsense beliefs about ourselves and others more often occur in much more mundane exchanges and contexts.

I hope that this article serves as a first step toward making more visible the role that Whiteness plays in shaping and limiting the potential for dialogue to occur in everyday places. And, I hope that my European-American colleagues will join me in looking anew on our “transformational” theories of dialogue, examining what has been left unsaid, and creating the discursive space for a more fully realized dialogic transformation of race relations in the United States.

Notes

- 1 The field of critical race theory has developed around this very set of issues and produced volumes of scholarship worthy of attention for those concerned with how some voices become valued or devalued institutionally by the law, educational systems, and so on (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000, 2001).
- 2 All names have been changed, although other demographic details have not.
- 3 CU has since modified its diversity education component in new-student orientation, and an evaluation of the changes is being conducted.

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La double impasse daltonienne : La blancheur et l’(im)possibilité du dialogue

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Cet essai affirme la position d’une théorie de la communication constructiviste et politiquement réactive (*politically responsive constructionist theory of communication*, PRCT) en soumettant que *des rencontres radicales avec l’altérité* sont cruciales pour le projet dialogique (Deetz & Simpson, 2004). Il implique aussi la critique de McPhail (2004) selon qui le racisme blanc et les oeillères qu’il produit inhibe de façon importante et peut-être irréparable la possibilité d’un dialogue significatif à propos de la race au travers de la « barrière de couleur » (DuBois, 1903). Cet article examine la viabilité du modèle PRCT en tant qu’il s’applique spécifiquement à la possibilité de dialogue au-delà des barrières de couleurs, et soutient que les discours de « daltonisme » (*colorblindness*) bloquent le dialogue sur la race aux États-Unis au lieu de le faire progresser. Des illustrations tirées des efforts d’un campus universitaire pour encourager le dialogue et construire une communauté accueillante et variée démontrent des façons subtiles et moins subtiles par lesquelles une position daltonienne peut restreindre l’espace discursif dans lequel le dialogue interracial pourrait se produire.

Die farbenblinde Doppel-Verknüpfung: Whiteness und die (Un-)Wahrscheinlichkeit eines Dialogs

Dieser Artikel stützt die Position einer politisch responsiven konstruktivistischen Theorie der Kommunikation (PRCT) und argumentiert, dass radikale Begegnungen mit dem Anderen für ein Dialog-Projekt kritisch sind (Deetz & Simpson, 2004). Ebenso betrachtet wird McPhails (2004) Kritik, dass weißer Rassismus und die Blindheiten, die er produziert, einen bedeutungsvollen Dialog über Rassen über die „color line“ (DuBois, 1902) hinaus signifikant und möglicherweise irreparabel blockiert. Dieser Artikel untersucht das PRCT-Modell auf seine Anwendbarkeit hinsichtlich der Möglichkeit eines bedeutungsvollen Dialogs über Rassenlinien hinaus und argumentiert, dass Diskurse von „Farbenblindheit“ Dialoge über Rasse in den Vereinigten Staaten eher behindern und nicht befördern. Illustriert werden diese Annahmen anhand der Bemühungen eines Universitätscampus den Dialog zu fördern und eine offene und diverse Gemeinschaft zu schaffen. Dargestellt werden subtile und weniger subtile Varianten wie eine farbenblinde Einstellung den diskursiven Raum, in dem ein Dialog zwischen den Rassen stattfindet, einengen kann.

El Dilema Doble del Daltónico: La Blancura y la (Im)Posibilidad del Diálogo

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Este ensayo afirma la posición de una respuesta política receptiva constructivista de la teoría de la comunicación (PRCT) al argumentar que los encuentros radicales con el otro son críticos para el proyecto de diálogo (Deetz & Simpson, 2004). Trata también la crítica de McPhail (2004) de que el racismo blanco, y lo que lo tapa, producen inhibiciones significativas y tal vez irreparables en la posibilidad de diálogo significativo sobre la raza a través de la “línea de color” (DuBois, 1903). Este artículo examina la viabilidad del modelo PRCT dado que se aplica específicamente a la posibilidad de diálogo a través de las líneas raciales y arguye que los discursos sobre “el daltonismo” dificultan, en vez de avanzar, el diálogo sobre la raza en los Estados Unidos. Ilustraciones de los esfuerzos de un campus universitario para crear diálogo y para construir una comunidad diversa y bienvenida ilustran las formas sutiles y no tan sutiles en las que la postura daltónica puede estrechar el espacio discursivo en el cual el diálogo interracial puede ocurrir.

色盲的双重束缚：白人种族主义和对话的可能性及不可能性

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本文认为和其他人的直接碰撞对于对话项目 (Deetz & Simpson, 2004) 来说是至关重要的，这证实了传播学政治性反馈结构理论 (PRCT) 的观点。本文还支持了 McPhail's (2004) 的批评，即白人种族主义及其带来的自大无知相当大程度上（也可能是不可修复地）抑制了在不同肤色之间进行有关种族之有意义对话 (DuBois, 1903) 的可能性。本文检测了将 PRCT 模式应用于跨越种族对话之可能性的有效性，并认为“色盲”过程阻碍而非促进了美国有关种族的对话活动。以某个大学校园为促进对话和建立友好和多元社区所作的努力为例，作者阐述了色盲立场如何微妙地（以及并不那么微妙地）降低了种族间对话发生的可能性。