



# Changing hearts and minds: the quest for open talk about race in educational leadership

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to seek to conceptualize a theory of self-contribution as a framework for understanding and demonstrating the dispositions and skills academics and educational leaders need to break the silence and engage in constructive talk about race across color lines.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Brian Fay’s framework for critical theory provided the guideposts for the construct of self-contribution. To address false consciousness, the authors turned to Mezirow’s unlearning. The work of Tatum, and Parker and Shapiro clarified the social crisis and the educative components used the voice of color thesis (Delgado and Stefancic), Pillow’s race-based epistemologies, Horsford’s research using counternarratives, and Argyris’ work on defensive behaviors. Finally, to address transformative actions the authors turned to Follett’s principles of unifying, and Laible’s loving epistemology.

**Findings** – The use of race-based theories to center the discourse about race in mixed race settings has the potential to move the debate forward – beyond colorblindness and toward color consciousness – to place civic relationships based on the integration of desires, an openness to mutual influence and a commitment to unifying rather than equal opportunity to gain power over others (Follett).

**Originality/value** – At this moment in time, the potential of educational leadership students to lead socially just and equitable communities depends on educational leadership faculty’s ability to participate in a way of knowing through self-contribution.

**Keywords** Race relations, Social control, Organizational development, Communication, Competences

**Paper type** Conceptual paper

Picture in your mind’s eye a university’s educational leadership department meeting where faculty members are faced with an open discussion about diversity issues, specifically focused on race. Downcast eyes, furtive glances, and questions concerning the motivation behind this discussion are followed by muttering in hallways. Afterwards, several faculty members confront the department’s leader about the necessity of this conversation, making known their objections to discussions of this nature. This real scenario is a stark reminder that the academic culture supports the privilege to resist, ignore, and condemn any topic or issue that leads to personal discomfort (Rusch, 2004). The dynamics and tensions of this meeting also suggest we have not moved far beyond Kurt Lewin’s (1948, p. 63) observations about racial stereotyping and the difficulty of changing hearts and minds. He said, “People often remain helpless in the face of their prejudices – perceptions and emotional reactions remain contrary to what he/she knows they ought to be”. The authors of this article are convinced that helplessness should not be an option for individuals committed to the preparation of educational leaders. Thus, the dynamics and tensions described above



became an impetus to frame a theory for understanding and demonstrating the dispositions and skills academics and educational leaders need to break the silence and engage in constructive talk about race across color lines, talk that might touch hearts and minds.

### **Race: the undiscussible**

Critical issues mediated by race in educational settings, from local schools to university classrooms, frequently are received with great apprehension, if not resistance (Brooks, 2007; López, 2003; Morrison *et al.*, 2006; Tatum, 2007). Even more problematic is the fact that race is often an undiscussed issue within the profession of educational administration (Rusch and Marshall, 1996; Rusch, 2004). Findings from a study of USA based preparation programs revealed that educational leadership faculty discussions centered on race or gender were infrequent or remarkably strained experiences (Rusch, 2004). Similar findings were reported by Bush and Moloï (2008, p. 110) who noted “a lack of attention to BME [Black and Minority Ethnic] issues” in the UK’s National Professional Preparation Qualification for Headship. One female minority student described White male tutors in the NPQH program, as doing “everything to attack my self esteem”. In fact, Rusch, Bush, and Moloï’s findings are not unlike the strained discourses observed in school settings that Shields *et al.* (2002, p. 133) and her colleagues described as “a kind of balkanization in which some groups increase their separation in order to preserve their unique characteristics or their perceived power or status”.

Even more troubling than this culture of silence and fear among higher education faculty members are the documented consequences when school heads and teachers fail to engage in these challenging, but necessary, conversations. There is mounting evidence that aspiring school heads who feel unprepared to talk about racial and cultural perspectives and differences, have limited ability to effectively lead in diverse social contexts and may even view “diversity as a negative” (Mabokela and Madsen, 2003, p. 150). “Avoiding controversy” was a prominent explanation from leaders in Lumby’s study of further education colleges in the UK, with one middle leader observing, “It’s almost a ban on talking about race and culture and diversity” (Morrison *et al.*, 2006, p. 289). In fact, new school heads who lack opportunities during preparation to talk constructively about complex social issues are more likely to revert to “deficit thinking” when working in communities of color or poverty (Noguera, 2003; Skrla and Scheurich, 2001).

The call to prepare school leaders with the capacity to lead socially just and equitable school communities, grounded in democratic values and beliefs, has been prominent for over a decade (for examples see Bush and Moloï, 2008; Lomotey, 1995; Scheurich and Laible, 1995; Brown, 2004; Lumby, 2006; McKenzie *et al.*, 2008). Recently, McKenzie and her colleagues suggested the profession is still at the “calling for” stage, rather than an action stage. Although many individuals provide thoughtful and useful strategies for program design and classroom pedagogy, few, if any authors, address the necessary preparation work for university faculty members who prepare school heads. How do professors of educational leadership move beyond their own fears, break the silence, and provide school leaders with fundamental knowledge of and experience with otherness?

### Understanding the risks

Return once more to the meeting that introduced this article. An important characteristic of the situation was the racial make-up of the group; the one person of color in the room (a co-author of this paper) had the burden of both choosing not to be offended and having to decide whether or not to speak up to defend all people of color, or to point out issues of fairness that one White faculty member described as “political correctness”. The White co-author of this paper faced some of the same choices but her reaction was far less guarded, suggesting that she had more privilege to confront the situation.

A key issue revealed in this scenario is the disproportionate amount of power, privilege, and risk experienced by White scholars or students compared to scholars or students of color when race is at the heart of the discussion. Disproportionate risk, a prominent feature of Scheurich’s (1993) advocacy for anti-racist scholarship, suggests that a roadmap for constructive talk about race must address the distinction between the racial standpoint/power positions of individuals engaging in these conversations.

### The power to silence

The history of race and racism in the western world has reified a social order that continues to award power and privilege to Whites, while subordinating and oppressing people of color. These unequal power relations not only exist, but continue to result in divergent perspectives and worldviews according to one’s racial identity and positionality. In addition to the example noted earlier, scholars of color offer well-documented accounts of being marginalized and silenced in the academy (López and Parker, 2003). Consequently, the lack of trust and subsequent discomfort between racial groups makes it particularly difficult to “talk about race” (Tatum, 2007).

Ironically, silence and fear appear to govern talk about race within many academic and educational administration communities – the very communities that profess to work toward equity and social justice in schools. In some cases, students of color in educational leadership classrooms describe shock, anger, and frustration when professors “behave like the issues aren’t there” (Rusch and Marshall, 1996, p. 25). Delpit (1995, p. 22) documented student responses that described interactions with professors about race as “defensive” and unreceptive. One student explained, “They don’t really hear me”. Some conclude that “there are groups [faculty] that do not want BME [Black and Minority Ethnic] groups to move forward” (Bush and Moloj, 2008, p. 110). In reality, the constructive facilitation of discourse on highly charged and controversial issues, mediated by race, is no simple task, even for highly trained and knowledgeable educational leadership scholars.

The authors’ interest in and commitment to constructive talk emerged in the middle of Horsford’s dissertation research project, which centered on race. Our different racial standpoints visibly influenced our dialogue about the counterstories (Delgado and Stefancic, 2000) shared by the study’s participants (Black educational leaders). The critical race analysis that framed the interpretation of their stories sparked a deeper and ongoing cross-racial dialogue about race, the underlying assumptions that guide conversations about race, and the privileges that dominant members of society enjoy to decidedly not talk about race. For example, one interchange about a particularly moving counternarrative provoked the White professor to suggest she had a counternarrative to the counternarrative. The discussion that followed, about the cooptation of critical race theory, had all the potential to be frozen by Horsford’s awareness of, or Rusch’s use of

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position power, thus thwarting any continuing research relationship between us. Each of us had to determine if we would trust – trust ourselves to engage in a conversation about race across racial lines, acknowledge the threats of racial standpoints/power positions, and trust our ability to cope with the inherent tensions and emotions that all too often lead to a sense of helplessness (Lewin, 1948).

### **The power of trust/mistrust**

Mistrust across racial lines has a long history. For example, when White women failed to address or understand the plight of women of color during the early USA feminist movement, mistrust led to serious rifts among feminist scholars and activists. A book that vividly framed the dilemma Black women faced when asked to support a movement to liberate the very women who had exploited them (hooks, 1984) was viewed as a treatise on race rather than a discussion about the feminist movement. Black women and women of color countered by developing race-based feminist theories based on their unique standpoints.

The rift continued into the 1980s and 1990s as research on women and feminist theory attained some standing in the educational leadership discourse, but studies that looked at the intersection of race and gender, or works by scholars of other races were still missing or invisible. In fact, Rusch's (2004, p. 40) study revealed that the overwhelmingly White professoriate was not familiar with research by women and people of color. One comment, "While women have written a few things, there is no work, to my knowledge, by people of color", is an example of the ignorance that engenders mistrust and thwarts constructive talk about race.

Despite all these historically grounded barriers, the dialogue between the authors of this article continued, sometimes smoothly, sometimes troubled, but it continued. Eventually we began to examine our persistence, which then led us to conceptualize and identify what it takes to engage in constructive conversations about or colored by race. Thus, the theory under construction, is intended to lead to actionable knowledge (Argyris, 1993) for professors of educational leadership and others committed to "unlearning privilege" (Spivak cited in Pillow, 2003, p. 196) and breaking the silence about race in order to advance the quest for racial and social justice.

### **Compromise: not the answer**

Privileged or dominant members of society frequently connect social justice issues with loss or compromise. In reality, when privileged Whites commit to social justice and equity, they do confront loss – the loss of a world that works primarily for them. Lumby (2006, p. 156) found educational leaders who believed that addressing diversity and ethnicity "could disadvantage them as the dominant group and might also threaten the quality of leadership". Likewise, one respondent in Rusch's (2004, p. 34) study assumed that because those in privileged positions do not see that the world is normed around them, "no matter how well intended – are not likely to willingly make changes that result in the loss of privilege". In fact, some respondents saw diversity issues as unimportant or irrelevant and complained that some took issues related to race "too seriously", suggesting that relinquishing privilege was not an option (Rusch, 2004, p. 30). In fact, Rusch (2004) argued that privilege actually supports "not knowing" and the fear and uncertainty that accompanies letting go of privilege can become a very real and personal dilemma. Even when White faculty intentionally engage in or

support socially just perspectives, the sense of superiority related to being on the “right side” of racial struggles can be a barrier to seeing privilege (Scheurich, 1993).

Follett, a 20th century community organizer who educated newly arrived immigrants in Boston, theorized that democracy was not just a choice of a governing form, but was a commitment to learn how to live with others, “a process, not a goal” (Follett, 1918, p. 99). Pursuing the issue of settling difference, Follett challenged the notion of compromise, by advancing a theory of integration. Moving beyond the notions of domination, compromise and self-sacrifice, Follett describe three results of integration: “You and I both get what we want, the whole situation moves forward, and the process often has community value” (Metcalfe and Urwick, 1941, p. 215). She defined the individual’s participation in the process as self-contribution and was very explicit about the dispositions and behaviors:

The individual is not to facilitate agreement by courteously (!) waiving his own point of view. That is just a way of shirking . . . I must not subordinate myself, I must affirm myself and give my full positive value to the meeting (Metcalfe and Urwick, 1941, p. 26).

Using Follett’s concept of self-contribution, we posit that individuals and groups that intentionally relinquish (contribute) the privilege of silence to talk constructively about race, also acknowledge that “a full positive value” (Metcalfe and Urwick, 1941, p. 26) may be different across color lines.

### **Developing a theory of self-contribution**

Moving the idea for a theory to a thoughtfully constructed theory is no simple task. Fay (1987, p. 31) integrative framework for a theory that leads to transformative action offered some guideposts. In his view, a “fully developed critical theory” includes:

- a full exploration of false consciousness;
- a clear picture of a social crisis;
- a comprehensive educative component; and
- an action plan for social transformation.

The authors believe the critical social science framework’s emphasis on “an action plan for social transformation” (Fay, 1987, p. 31) makes it a particularly cogent approach for the development of a theory dedicated to building capacity to engage in constructive talk about race across color lines.

The sections that follow elaborate on Fay’s required elements. To design a roadmap that takes us beyond false consciousness, we explored theories of unlearning (Mezirow, 2000). The work of Tatum (2007) and Parker and Shapiro (1992) clarified the social crisis. For educative components, we turned to the voice of color thesis (Delgado and Stefancic, 2000), Pillow’s (2003) race-based epistemologies, Horsford’s (2007) research using counternarratives Argyris’ (1993) work on defensive behaviors, Follett’s (1918, 1919) principles of unifying, and Laible’s (2000) loving epistemology.

### **Exploring false consciousness and unlearning privilege**

Organizational theorist Margaret Wheatley (2002, p. 34) provides some guidance for dominants who are attempting to unlearn privilege when she asks, “Are you willing to be disturbed?”. Unlearning is no simple process for adults, particularly academic

professionals who attribute a great deal of their identity on knowing. It requires learned adults to acknowledge that they “are blindly ignorant of the fact that [they] are blindly ignorant” (Fay, 1987, p. 11). In fact, unlearning and relearning require the exploration of personal and deeply embedded paradigms, the examination of well-practiced personal habits of mind or mental models, and the potential reordering of assumptions (Mezirow, 2000). The process also calls for the personal introspection and deep reflection that academics teach, but often do not practice. Mezirow’s (2000) research on adult learning reveals that individuals hold meaning within themselves and validate that meaning through interactions with others. Therefore, in order for individuals or groups to engage in constructive discourse about race across color lines, the White participants would need to acknowledge the inherent privilege associated with their version of sensemaking and the degree of power it has in the conversation. This is where the unlearning can begin, if (and if is the operative word) the individuals are willing “to be disturbed” (Wheatley, 2002), to make sense and meaning from a perspective that is not their own or the dominant view.

One example of unlearning in action might have occurred in the educational leadership faculty meeting previously described if multiple members of the group had engaged in discussing how colleagues and students of color might respond to increased diversity awareness among our faculty members. Working from the notion of self-contribution, the White majority faculty members would have contributed their sense of comfort and security to be in an awkward and exploring space and the single Black member of the group might have experienced a greater sense of reassurance and willingness to join the conversation. This example, and others like them, illustrate how messy and emotional unlearning and relearning can be when talk about race across racial line is the heart of the conversation. “As people challenge assumptions, engage in conflict, and negotiate many points of view, the possibility that personal ideas might undergo reconstruction impedes many from participating” (Rusch, 2004, p. 44).

### **The social crisis: silence, fear, and avoidance of issues of race**

The social crisis we have identified is the avoidance of discourse among educational leadership faculty about race. Rusch’s (2004) findings revealed educational leadership faculty in most institutions avoided or were stressed by issues of gender and race. Educational leadership programs that do not explore and develop cultural competence in aspiring and practicing school leaders do a huge disservice to graduates who lead in diverse communities. According to Parker and Shapiro (1992, p. 71) we cannot adequately prepare future leaders to achieve these goals if we avoid exposing them to issues of race, racism, and racial politics and demonstrate to them how these issues still permeate the educational landscape. In her observations concerning the current attitudes and disposition of students in higher education, Tatum (2007, p. 105-6) warns:

We are confronted by the loss of civility in increasingly diverse communities. We witness the feelings of fragmentation and increased psychological distress . . . We see a loss of balance, too often a lack of integrity, and limited vision. And yet we need all of these – balance, integrity, vision; a clear sense of collective responsibility and ethical leadership – in order to prepare our students for wise stewardship of their world and active participation in a democracy.

However, we cannot expect students of educational leadership to demonstrate this sense of balance, integrity, vision, and collective responsibility, while we as faculty

exhibit and engage in the fragmentation and distress that results from a culture of silence and fear on issues of race. So what would compel educational leadership faculty to stay in a space of learning and relearning? To answer that question we explore the following educative components for as Rusch (2004, p. 46) asserts, "If educational leadership faculty wish to keep the idea of a dynamic democracy going we must couple our privilege to know with the responsibility to learn".

### **Comprehensive educative components**

#### *Valuing the voice-of-color*

Within the context of critical race theory, Delgado and Stefancic (2000, p. 9) introduce the notion of a voice-of-color thesis, which asserts why the experiences and narratives of people of color have inherent value. They explain:

Coexisting in somewhat uneasy tension with anti-essentialism, the voice-of-color thesis holds that because of their different histories and experiences with oppression, Black, Indian, Asian, and Latino/a writers and thinkers may be able to communicate to their White counterparts matters that the Whites are unlikely to know. Minority status, in other words, brings with it a presumed competence to speak about race and racism.

Pillow (2003) points out how race-based methodologies, which are centered on racialized experiences, support standing in hegemonic spaces from an entirely different viewpoint, which may lead to new possibilities or understandings. Race-based epistemologies and methodologies are a valuable tool for breaking the silence and advancing collective constructive talk about race. In a study that explored the counternarratives of Black educational leaders, Horsford, 2007 (p. 211) concluded, "laying bare the narrative of White privilege, coupled with exposure to counternarratives, will prepare future educational leaders to acknowledge and embrace this fundamental responsibility". According to Horsford (2007, p. 209):

... the use of counternarratives and voices of color in educational leadership courses and programs can create new opportunities to facilitate and foster discussions of race, culture, and politics in education ... Counterstorytelling, grounded in the experiences of people of color, may prove to be a powerful a tool used to promote and provoke reaction, response, and reflections that can lead to different ways of understanding and meaning-making" and offer "insight to future educational leaders that will better prepare them to work with students and communities of color".

#### *Moving beyond defensiveness*

A practice centered in valuing voices of color is bound to challenge individual theories of action, which in turn, triggers defensiveness (Argyris, 1986, 1990, 1993). In fact, the most common response to a viewpoint that challenges our own worldview is a counterattack, just to avoid embarrassment or threat. Avoiding embarrassment, according to Darling-Hammond (1992, p. 23) "submerges talk about those things that are potentially most controversial and potentially most important [...] and the silence self-seals the system from learning.

Argyris (1990, 1993) calls these defensive routines, noting that the behaviors are usually legitimized through official policy, often rewarded, and effectively protect individuals and the system from learning or taking corrective action. Argyris (1993, pp. 30-1) concluded that educators are frequently "unaware of how skillfully they create

defensive routines, how skillfully they compound them when they try to reduce them, how skillfully they blame others, and how skillfully they deny all of the above”.

Listening is an important strategy for moving beyond defensiveness. Pillow (2003, p. 196) gives explicit advice to “simply listen, learn, and shift, both personally and epistemologically”. Wheatley (2002, p. 16) elaborates:

Lately, I've been listening for what surprises me. What did I just hear that startled me? . . . Noticing what surprises and disturbs me has been a very useful way to see invisible beliefs. If what you say surprises me, I must have been assuming something else was true. If what you say disturbs me, I must believe something contrary to you . . . My shock at your position exposes my own position.

Wheatley's perspective not offers a strategy for cross-racial dialogue and discourse in classroom and workplace settings on matters of race, culture, and diversity, it also demonstrates the need to move beyond defensiveness and toward a space where individuals can travel into each other's worlds to talk constructively about race and its implications for the preparation of educational leaders.

### **Transformative actions**

#### *Integrating multiple narratives*

After educating immigrants during the early 1900s, Follett devoted her life to understanding and developing theories for democratic actions that led to building common purpose. Her theory of integration is particularly instructive for constructing spaces where individuals can travel to one another's worlds.

Follett (1918, p. 97) posited that skills for “unifying” or “integrating” multiple ideas was a “secret that would revolutionize the world”. Unifying, in her view, was a dynamic process based on the notion that the “self is always in flux weaving itself out of its relations” (Follett, 1919, p. 57). She was committed to the notion of collective thought, but insisted it must be “evolved by a collective process” (Tonn, 2003, p. 275). New understandings, according to Follett (1924), occur because individuals and environments are constantly creating and recreating each other. She argued that relationship and interaction were circular in nature, governed by mutuality and reciprocity, and promoted active discussion as a tool for unifying diverse ideas. She actually disavowed compromise as a useful strategy in dispute resolution, proposing that opposing ideas be integrated into a third way: “The core of the development, expansion, growth, progress of humanity is the confronting and gripping of opposites” (Follett, 1918, p. 302). She began to promote discussion as a tool for looking multiple and diverse ideas and facts, suggesting that an opposing idea had the possibility to enrich your own view. She described the process as “intellectual teamwork” (Follett, 1918, p. 97).

We suggest that intellectual teamwork is the self-contribution educational leadership faculty members would have to offer in order for constructive discourse to take place. However, we also acknowledge that the practice, if centered on the voices of color or race-based epistemology, may foster the defensive behaviors noted earlier. Laible's (2000) scholarship offers support and encouragement for the practice.

#### *Traveling toward community*

Dispositions are essential to constructive talk about race across color lines. The loving epistemology, a construct for cross-race research developed by the White scholar, Judith Laible, provides insights into the value-set educational leaders and academics



need to break the silence surrounding race. Constructive talk, transformative collective thought, and intellectual teamwork require a commitment to ethics, specifically the ethic of care and responsibility to the Other (Laible, 2000). In addition, Laible (2000, p. 691), drew from Collin's account of Sojourner Truth's "movement among multiple communities" and the impact that "traveling" had on her worldview. For Laible, "traveling", suggested a process of engaging with each other's worlds as a way to see ourselves in their eyes. The desire to travel with an ethic of care is an essential disposition for educational leaders and academics who commit to constructive talk about race.

### **Relinquishing privilege through self-contribution**

Silence can be a destructive societal force. The lack of constructive talk about race across color lines only compounds and exacerbates the social issues that aspiring and practicing educational leaders face on a daily basis. As we moved through Fay's (1987) elements for theory development, some key observations emerged. First of all, exploring the false consciousness of Whiteness and privilege is fundamental to breaking the silence about race. For the most part, this element, which is part of unlearning, is the responsibility of those whose racial positionality affords them unearned power and societal position. Based on personal experience, the White member of this team posits that unlearning is a long term and ongoing process. She has often noted in previous work that the more privilege one has, the harder it is to see (Poplin Gosetti and Rusch, 1995; Rusch, 2004). Experience tells us that a sense of loss is the first line defensive reaction when privilege is challenged. Intellectual curiosity and a passion for resolving social issues can carry one forward, can even lead to exploring divergent standpoints, counterstances, and counternarratives, but a crucial element of this theory is Follett's notion of self-contribution. With intentional self-contribution, Fay (1987, p. 89) would suggest that:

... people can achieve a much clearer picture of who they are, and of what the real meaning of their social practices is, as a first step in becoming different sorts of people with different sorts of social arrangements.

It is clear that multiple educative elements are at our disposal to advance a constructive discourse about race across color lines. However, our work in developing this theory only confirmed the importance of learning from divergent standpoints, counterstories, and counternarratives. We often found that listening was not hearing - that being disturbed was discomfiting and awkward. What surprised and who was surprised frequently revealed who faced the larger burden of explanation. Self-contribution frequently needed the supporting element of Laible's loving epistemology so we could continue to move forward. What moved us forward is a belief that a self-contribution must result in transformative action (Fay, 1987) or actionable knowledge (Argyris, 1993) that benefits not only educational leadership students, but the school communities they lead as well. Our process is based on intellectual teamwork, but we are clear that the team must be expanded and include all educational leadership colleagues.

So how does testing of this theory, the move to Fay's (1987) action plan begin? Scheurich (1993, p. 9) offers important advice from his position as a White male academic, stating, "I have tried to start from where I am". Committing to intellectual

teamwork may require educational leadership faculty to relinquish the privilege of individual expertise in order to travel to a different worldview. Based on the complex issues of power, voice, and identity that are at work in cross-racial dialogue, a self-contribution will most likely take different forms, meaning, and degrees based on one's racial standpoint, positionality, and perspective. But if each participant begins from where he/she is, the potential for constructive discourse may be heightened. Choosing self-contribution could very well move us beyond the sense of "helplessness in the face of [our] prejudices" (Lewin, 1948, p. 63) to a place where our emotional reactions and perceptions are merely good information for making sense of what disturbs us (Wheatley, 2002). As hooks (1994, p. 113) points out, "Confronting one another across differences means that we must change ideas about how we learn; rather than fearing conflict, we have to find ways to use it as a catalyst for new thinking, for growth". At this moment in time, the potential of our educational leadership students to lead socially just and equitable communities depends on our ability, as educational leadership faculty, to participate in a way of knowing through self-contribution.

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