Why Can't We All Just Be Individuals?

In my years as a white person co-facilitating anti-racism courses for primarily white audiences in a range of academic, corporate, and government institutions across the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom, I have come to believe that the Discourse of Individualism is one of the primary barriers preventing well-meaning (and other) white people from understanding racism. Individualism is such a deeply entrenched discourse that it is virtually immovable without sustained effort. A recent interaction may illustrate the depth of this narrative.

> I was co-facilitating a mandatory workplace training titled *Race & Social Justice.* Two key components of this training are my presentation, as a white person, on the dynamics of white privilege, and my co-facilitator's presentation, as a person of color,[1] on the dynamics of internalized racial oppression. Included in my presentation is a list of common barriers for whites in seeing racism. One of these barriers is that we see ourselves as individuals, outside of social groups. I had just finished presenting this list and had called for a break, during which a white woman, "Sue," who had been sitting next to a white man, "Bill," approached me and declared, "Bill and I think we should all just see each other as individuals." Although in my work moments like this occur frequently, they continue to disorient me on two interconnected levels. First, I had just stated that seeing each other as individuals was a perspective only available to the dominant group. Yet Sue's statement implied I had never heard or considered this most simple and popular of "solutions" to racism, much less just raised and critiqued it. I was left wondering, yet again, what happens cognitively for many whites in forums such as this that prevents them from actually hearing what is being presented. Second, why did she, as a white person, feel confident to declare the one-sentence "answer" to a profoundly complex and perennial dilemma of social life? Why not consider my background in the field and instead engage me in a dialogue on the matter, or ask me to explain my point in more depth? I did my best to reiterate my previous position, but to no avail. By the afternoon break, Sue had walked out.

So what was Sue and Bill's point? In my experience, when white people insist on Individualism in discussions about racism, they are in essence saying:

> My race has not made a difference in my life, so why do we have to talk about race as if it mattered? It is talking about race as if it mattered that divides us. I don't see myself as a member of a racial group; you shouldn't see me that way either. In fact, by saying that my group membership matters, you are generalizing. Generalizing discounts my individuality; unless you know me, you can't profess to know anything about my life and all of the ways I am unique relative to any one else. Further, as an individual I am objective and view others as individuals and not as members of racial groups. For example, if I were hiring I would hire the best person for the job no matter what their race was. Racism

> will disappear when we all see each other as individuals. In fact, it has disappeared because I already see everyone as individuals—it's just misguided people such as yourself who refuse to see everyone as an individual and thus keep racism alive.

Obviously I disagree with these familiar dominant claims, as they stand in the face of all evidence to the contrary, both research-based evidence of racial discrimination and disparity on every measure (see Copeland, 2005; Hochschild & Weaver, 2007; Micceri, 2009; Wessel, 2005) and visible evidence of ongoing patterns of segregation in education, economics, and housing.

The purpose of this paper is to offer a critical analysis of how the Discourse of Individualism, rather than ameliorating racism, actually functions to obscure and maintain racism's manifestation in our lives. In countering these claims in depth, my goal is to provide a more comprehensive challenge to the dominant Discourse of Individualism that inevitably surfaces in anti-racist work, for the more deeply we can interrogate this discourse, the more effectively we might challenge it. In order to challenge dominant discourse, one must be able to think critically about it; to see what the discourse obscures and how it functions to normalize inequitable power relations (Billig, 2001; Fairclough, 1989). To this end, I will start with a theoretical overview of discourse, critical discourse analysis, and the Discourse of Individualism, followed by an explication of eight key dynamics of racism that this discourse obscures. I will conclude with my thoughts on why a critique of Individualism is so difficult for many whites to entertain, and how we might reconceptualize Individualism in service of challenging racism.

Theories of Discourse

Discourse analysis is a useful tool in explicating racism because it allows for a nuanced analysis of the socially and historically informed discourses that are available for negotiating racial positions (Gee, 1999; Van Dijk, 1993). Discourse analysis can reveal processes of racism that otherwise would be difficult to establish, or that would be formally denied by the majority of participants (Van Dijk, 1992). In this section I provide a brief overview of the methodology of discourse analysis, and specifically overview the Discourse of Individualism.

Discourse

In theories of discourse, language is not conceptualized as a "pure" or neutral transmitter of a universal reality or truth (Allen, 1996). Rather, language is conceptualized as the historically and culturally situated means by which we *construct* reality or truth and thus is dependent on the historical and social

moment in which it is expressed (Billig, 2001; Cameron, Frazer, Harvey, Ramptom, & Richardson, 1992; Gee, 1999; Fairclough, 1989; Foucault, 1972). Meaning is made through the specific frameworks that are culturally, historically, and ideologically available to a specific social group at a specific moment in space and time (Billig, 2001). For example, the concept of individualism would have been incomprehensible before the Enlightenment, and the concept of distinct human races incomprehensible before European colonialism (Mills, 1999). Gee (1999) states that, "Meaning is not general and abstract, not something that resides in dictionaries, or even in general symbolic representations inside people's heads. Rather, it is situated in specific social and cultural practices, and it is continually transformed in those practices" (p. 63). Justin Johnson (2005) explains discourse as "an institutionalized way of speaking that determines not only what we say and how we say it, but also what we do not say. Discourses provide a unified set of words, symbols, and metaphors that allow us to construct and communicate a coherent interpretation of reality" (p. 1). It is not possible to escape discourse because we cannot make sense of our social relations without the meaning-making frameworks that discourses provide. Fairclough (1989) states that "whenever people speak or listen or write or read, they do so in ways that are determined socially and have social effects" (p. 23).

Yet discourse is not simply a socio-historically specific meaning-making framework. Discourse, because it constructs social relations and social positioning, is infused with relations of unequal power. As Allen (1996) states, language and discourse are not "theory neutral 'descriptors' but theory-laden constructs inseparable from systems of injustice" (p. 95). Fairclough (1989) argues that discourse is shaped by relations of power and invested with ideologies; ideology—taken-for-granted assumptions infused throughout a society —is the prime means of manufacturing consent to these power relations. Fairclough states, "The idea of 'power behind discourse' is that the whole social order of discourse is put together and held together as a hidden effect of power" (p. 55). Discourses are acquired within and licensed by specific social and historically shaped practices representing the values and interests of specific groups of people. As Billig (2001) explains, "Each act of utterance… carries an ideological history. An ideology comprises the ways of thinking and behaving within a given society which make the ways of that society seem 'natural' or unquestioned to its members" (p. 217). In this way, ideology is the "common-sense" of the society that functions in various ways to render unequal social relations as natural or inevitable (Billig, 2001; Fairclough, 1989). Discourses that become dominant do so because they serve the interests of those in power. A discourse may initially surface as a challenge to power, such as Martin Luther King's call for a "color-blind" society, but if they resonate with the masses in a way that threatens dominant interests, they are often co-opted and reinterpreted by

and in service of dominant interests, as is unquestionably the case with color-blind discourse (Bonilla-Siva, 2007; Schofield, 2004; Su, 2007). Thus, to study discourse is to study power and ideology.

The Discourse of Individualism

The Discourse of Individualism is a specific set of ideas, words, symbols, and metaphors—a storyline or narrative—that creates, communicates, reproduces, and reinforces the concept that each of us are unique individuals and that our group memberships, such as our race, class, or gender, are not important or relevant to our opportunities (Flax, 1999). In explaining the Discourse of Individualism, Flax (1999) notes that there is an irreconcilable tension within U.S. life. The legitimacy of our institutions depends upon the concept that all citizens are equal. At the same time, we each occupy distinct raced (and gendered, classed, etc.) positions that profoundly shape our life chances in ways that are not voluntary or random. In order to manage this tension, we use the Discourse of Individualism. This discourse posits that there are no intrinsic barriers to individual success, and that failure is not a consequence of systematic structure but of individual character. It also conveys that success is independent of privilege, that one succeeds through individual effort, and that there are no favored starting positions that provide competitive advantage (Flax, 1999).

The Discourse of Individualism is a claim that we all act independently from one another and that we all have the same possibility of achievement and are unmarked by social positions such as race, class, and gender (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). As Mill states, however, "The reality is that one can pretend the body does not matter only because a particular body… [white] is being presupposed as the somatic norm" (p. 53). The Discourse of Individualism posits race as irrelevant. In fact, claiming that race is relevant to one's life chances is seen as limiting one's ability to stand on one's own; standing on one's own is both the assumption and the goal of Individualism (Flax, 1999). Because it obscures how social positioning impacts opportunity, the Discourse of Individualism is a dominant discourse that functions ideologically to reinforce and reproduce relations of unequal power.

Critical Discourse Analysis

Discourse analysis is the study of language and the making of meaning in action and in social contexts. It is a method of investigating the back-and-forth dialogues which constitute social action, along with patterns of signification and representation which constitute culture (Davies & Harre, 1990; Gee, 1999; Wetherell, Taylor, & Yates, 2002). Discourse analysis is attentive to the usages of language and how those usages position speakers in relation to others, both physically present others and larger categories of others (i.e., social groups; Gee,

1999). As with other forms of meaning, discourse analysts do not conceptualize language about the self as a transparent or neutral transmitter of one's core ideas or personhood. Rather, language about the self is conceptualized as historically and socially situated; the language itself creating what it means to be a person. *Critical* discourse analysis specifically focuses on the discursive reproduction of social inequality (Van Dijk, 1993). In differentiating critical discourse analysis from other forms, Van Dijk (1993) states that, "Although there are many directions in the study and critique of social inequality, the way we approach these questions and dimensions is by focusing on *the role of discourse in the (re)production and challenge of dominance*" (p. 249, emphasis in original). Dominance is defined here as the exercise of social power by elites, institutions, or groups that results in reproducing, maintaining, and justifying social inequality. The reproduction process includes the implicit support, enactment, representation, legitimation, denial, mitigation, or concealment of dominance. Critical discourse analysts focus on the structures, strategies, or other properties of text, talk, verbal interaction, or communicative events that play a role in these modes of reproduction. Van Dijk, in describing critical discourse analysis, states:

> This does not mean that we see power and dominance merely as unilaterally "imposed" on others. On the contrary, in many situations, and sometimes paradoxically, power and even power abuse may seem "jointly produced," e.g. when dominated groups are persuaded, by whatever means, that dominance is "natural" or otherwise legitimate. Thus, although an analysis of strategies of resistance and challenge is crucial for our understanding of actual power and dominance relations in society, and although such an analysis needs to be included in a broader theory of power, and counter-power and discourse, our critical approach prefers to focus on the elites and their discursive strategies for the maintenance of inequality. (p. 250)

Whites are the racial elite in the U.S. (Dyer, 1997; Feagin, 2001; Lipsitz, 1998; Leonardo, 2009; Mills, 1999; Morrison, 1992; Roediger, 2008) and thus this analysis explicates the Discourse of Individualism as an ideology of dominance. Indeed, in order to relate the Discourse of Individualism to the reproduction of dominance and inequality, we need to examine in detail how this discourse functions; how does it position social actors and groups in relation to one another? What does it explain or legitimize in terms of power relations, and how?

Relationally, the Discourse of Individualism does more than posit that opportunity is equal and people arrive at their achievements through hard work alone, thus positioning dominant group members in a favorable light; it simultaneously obscures structural barriers and positions members of social

groups who have achieved less in an unfavorable light. Van Dijk (1993) states that:

> The justification of inequality involves two complementary strategies, namely the positive representation of the own group, and the negative representation of the Others. Arguments, stories, semantic moves and other structures of such discourse consistently and sometimes subtly, have such implications, for instance in everyday conversations, political discourse, textbooks or news reports (Van Dijk, 1987a, 1991, 1993a). Thus, models are being expressed and persuasively conveyed that contrast us with THEM. (p. 263, capitalization in original)

Although on the surface, suggesting that we are all "just individuals" may appear to represent everyone equally (i.e., as an individual) and therefore not function as unequal group representation, dominant society, relying on the Discourse of Individualism, must also apply it on a macro level to explain persistent patterns in achievement and outcomes. This is the level at which we see Individualism positioning groups at the top of the social hierarchy (in the case of race, whites) as a collection of outstanding (and unraced) individuals who value hard work, education, and determination. Simultaneously, groups of color who have been consistently denied institutional access and thereby have not consistently achieved at the group level (Conley, 1999; Meizhu, Robles, & Leondar-Wright, 2006) lack these values and ethics. Of course, it also functions at the micro level to invalidate an individual person of color's experiences of structural racism. If society acknowledged that social group memberships such as race, class, and gender mattered, structural inequality would need to be addressed, not dismissed. Thus, as Fairclough (1989) states, "power is won, held, and lost in social struggles. We might say that … discourse is the site of power struggles—for control over orders of discourse is a powerful mechanism for sustaining power" (p. 74). This helps explain why discourses are so passionately contested—why Sue and others for whom the racial status quo appears to be working are so invested in Individualism (in this case, because as a dominant discourse it upholds current social structures which favorably benefit and represent whites), and why I and others who see the status quo as inequitable are so invested in challenging it.

What Dynamics of Racism Does the Discourse of Individualism Mask?

Before I discuss the specific dynamics of racism that the Discourse of Individualism masks, I want to be clear about how racism is defined here. Although people use the terms racism and prejudice interchangeably as if they mean the same thing, they do not (Bell, 1997; Hilliard, 1992). Prejudice is learned pre-judgment. It operates on the individual level and all people have prejudice; it is not possible to avoid absorbing misinformation circulating in the culture about

social groups to which we do not belong (Harro, 2001; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2009; Tatum, 2001). However, scholars define racism as race prejudice plus the social and institutional power to enforce that prejudice throughout the culture (Augoustinos & Reynolds, 2001; Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Dei, Karumanchery, & Karumanchery-Luik, 2004; Fine, 1997; Frankenberg, 1997; Hilliard, 1992; Hyland, 2009; Jones, 1997). Akintunde (1999) states, "Racism is a systemic, societal, institutional, omnipresent, and epistemologically embedded phenomenon that pervades every vestige of our reality" (p. 1). Racism encompasses economic, political, social, and cultural structures, actions, and beliefs that systematize and perpetuate an unequal distribution of privileges, resources, and power between white people and people of color, with whites the beneficiaries of that unequal distribution (Hilliard, 1992). For example, in the U.S., which is the primary context for this analysis, only whites have the collective group power to benefit from their racial prejudices in ways that privilege all members of their racial group regardless of intentions (McIntosh, 2004; Trepagnier, 2007; Weber, 2009). Therefore, in the U.S. context, only whites can be racist because the term refers to holding social and institutional power.

In this section, I review eight key dynamics of racism that the Discourse of Individualism masks or reinforces. First however, let me be clear: I am not denying that we are all individuals *in general*. Rather, I am arguing that white insistence on Individualism *in regards to racism in particular* prevents cross-racial understanding, denies the salience of race and racism in our lives, and serves to reinforce and maintain racist relations. It is important to note that processes underlying racist ideologies and discourse production are largely not explicit. That is, there is no need to assume that discourses that support racist relations are intentional or even conscious. As Van Dijk (1993) states, “Intentionality is irrelevant in establishing whether discourses or other acts may be interpreted as being racist” (p. 262).

Dynamic One: Denies the Significance of Race and the Advantages of Being White

Scientific research has shown that there are no biological or genetically distinct races as we have traditionally understood them (Sundquist, 2008). The differences we can observe, such as hair texture, skin tone, and facial features, occur at the most superficial genetic level. There are actually much more genetic differences *between* members of what we think of as a racial group, rather than across racial groups. These superficial differences are due to adaptations to geography (i.e., more melanin in the skin protects those who live in warmer climates; Madrigal & Barbujani, 2007; Winlow, 2006). Given these findings, we now understand race to be socially constructed; its meaning and boundaries change over time and are deeply affected by current social and political dynamics

(Ossorio & Duster, 2005; Sundquist, 2009). In other words, race is not about difference, it is about the *meaning* a society assigns to difference, in this case the superficial differences of physical appearance.

Despite its scientific insignificance at a genetic level, race has profound meaning as a social category. There are consistent, predictable patterns related to one's life outcomes based on the racial group society assigns to people. On every measure—health, education, interaction with the criminal justice system, income, and wealth—there is disparity between white people and people of color, with people of color consistently relegated to the bottom and white people holding consistent advantage (Meizhu et al., 2006; Picower, 2009; Weber, 2009). Regardless of the intentions of white people, and regardless of the other social groups they may belong to, such as class, gender, sexual orientation, religion, ability, etc., whites as a group benefit from a society in which racism (white advantage) is deeply embedded (DiAngelo, 2006b). These benefits are referred to as "white privilege." White privilege is a sociological concept referring to advantages enjoyed and taken for granted by whites that cannot be enjoyed and taken for granted by people of color in the same context (government, community, workplace, schools, etc.; Johnson, A., 2005; Tatum, 2003). Whites need not hold consciously racist beliefs or intentions in order to benefit from being white (see McIntosh, 2004). Insistence on seeing everyone as an individual and ignoring the significance of group membership denies the reality that not all individuals have the same access to resources based on whether they are perceived as white or a person of color.

Dynamic Two: Hides the Accumulation of Wealth over Generations

Seeing ourselves as individuals erases our history and hides the way in which wealth has accumulated over generations and benefits us, as a group, today. Our country was founded on the exploits of slavery (as well as genocide), and racism did not end when slavery ended. Legal exclusion of people of color, in addition to illegal acts of terrorism against them such as lynching, continued all the way through the 1960s. For example, people of color were denied Federal Housing Act (FHA) loans in the 1950s that allowed a generation of whites to attain middle class status through home ownership (Wise, 2005). Home ownership is critical in the U.S. because it is how the "average" person builds and passes down wealth, providing the starting point for the next generation (Yeung & Conley, 2008). People of color were systematically denied this opportunity and today the average white family has eight times the wealth of the average black or Latino family (Conley, 1999; Federal Reserve Board, 2007). Excluding people of color from mechanisms of society that allow the building of wealth continues today through illegal but common practices such as higher mortgage rates, more difficulty getting loans, real estate agents steering them away from "good"

neighborhoods, discrimination in hiring, and unequal school funding (Johnson & Shapiro, 2003; Oliver & Shapiro, 1995). Insisting on Individualism hides the reality of white advantage at every level of our past and present society through superficial and simplistic platitudes such as "I didn't own slaves so I have not benefited from racism."

Dynamic Three: Denies Social and Historical Context

Discourses are an interrelated "system of statements which cohere around common meanings and values ... [that] are a product of social factors, of powers and practices, rather than an individual's set of ideas" (Hollway, 1984, p. 231). These statements are embedded in a matrix of past statements, stories, and meanings—they connect to, expand, extend, and refer back to discourses already circulating in the culture. If they did not connect to existing discourse, we could not make sense of them. Removing these historical dimensions from the analysis prevents an understanding of all that has occurred in the past (Mills, 1999). Insisting on Individualism denies that we are products of our historical lineage and prevents us from understanding how the past bears upon the present and how it has led us to the current conditions in which we find ourselves. When whites shift the discussion to one of individual experience, these experiences are posited as if they occurred in a socio-historical vacuum (DiAngelo & Allen, 2006). The individual is thereby positioned as a unique entity—one that appears to have emerged from the ether, untouched by socio-historic conditioning—rather than as a social, cultural, and historical subject. To be able to think critically about the phenomenon of racism, we must be able to think socio-historically about it. Individualism falsely positions us as existing outside of social history.

For example, beyond the accumulation of wealth discussed in point two, there are non-monetary social benefits accrued from whiteness that were honed and ratified through U.S. history. Harris (1993) discusses whiteness as a form of property that confers social and legal status, resource, and privilege. McIntosh (2004) uses the metaphor of a knapsack to describe these social benefits: "White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools, and blank checks" (p. 1). These provisions include the everyday racial comfort of being seen as "normal;" a sense of racial belonging in the media, textbooks, and on college campuses; feeling racially welcome in virtually any situation and environment deemed "valuable" by mainstream society (e.g., in the "good" schools and neighborhoods); and having advantage over people of color on every measure including health and health care, the criminal justice system, education, and net worth (Picower, 2009). Individualism denies this social and historical context of privilege.

Dynamic Four: Prevents a Macro Analysis of the Institutional and Structural Dimensions of Social Life

Insisting that we should just see ourselves as individuals prevents us from seeing and addressing persistent social and historical patterns of inequality based on social group membership. Group membership is traced to consistently inequitable outcomes on every indicator of quality of life and these outcomes are well documented and predictable (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Jensen, 2005; Weber, 2009). Limiting our analysis to the *micro* or individual level prevents a *macro* or "big picture" assessment. It also reinforces the conceptualization of racism as individual acts of meanness that only some "bad" people commit. At the micro level, we cannot assess and address the macro dimensions of society that help hold racism in place, such as practices, policies, norms, rules, laws, traditions, and regulations (Kincheloe, 1999). For example, in the U.S., people of color have been barred by laws and by discrimination from participating in government wealth-building programs that benefit white Americans (Conley, 1999; Wise, 2005). Individualism keeps our focus on isolated exceptions to the rules and allows us to deny the significance of the rules themselves, who makes the rules, and who the rules serve. Consider for example the ways in which schools are funded through the property tax base of the community they are situated in. Given that due to systematic and historical racism, youth of color disproportionately live in poor communities and their families rent rather than own, youth of color are penalized through this policy, which ensures that poor communities will have inferior schools (Kozol, 2005). In turn, this practice ensures that middle- and upper-class students, who are more likely to be white, will get a superior education and have less competition in the future workplace—an example of both institutional racism and its result, individual white privilege. In the face of all the possible creative options for funding schools to ensure that every child gets equal access to quality education, the current method of funding and the social acceptance of this tradition is an example of institutional racism.

Other examples of institutional racism that reinforce the ways that schools reproduce inequality include: mandatory culturally biased testing; "ability" tracking; a primarily white teaching force with the power to determine which students belong in which tracks; cultural definitions of intelligence, what constitutes it, and how it is measured; and standards of good behavior that reflect dominant white norms (Kunjufu, 2005; Lee, 2005; Oakes, 2008). All of these dynamics work together and function as institutional racism. Rather than serving as the great equalizer, schools function in actual practice to reproduce racial inequality (Abu El-Haj & Rubin, 2009; Apple, 2004; Gillborn, 2008; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 2006).

Individualism also allows whites to exempt ourselves personally from these patterns and the resulting network of race-based advantage (Jensen, 2005; McIntosh, 2004). In other words, as a white person, if I personally do not agree with receiving advantages, Individualism allows me to deny that I receive them, as if a desire that resides in my head can effectively ward off the society in which I am embedded. Of course, even if it were possible to simply decide not to benefit from racial advantages, it would require at least two criteria: 1) admit that I benefit from racial privilege and 2) become conscious of the myriad ways I act on that privilege and stop acting on it. While the first criteria is relatively straightforward, the second entails a lifetime of reflection and study and still it remains dubious that it is possible to become conscious of all that we are unconscious of, or to interrupt the totality of the mechanisms of society (Sullivan, 2006). As McIntosh (2004) muses, "I think whites are carefully taught not to recognize white privilege... I have come to see white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets that I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was 'meant' to remain oblivious" (p. 1). Even if we could effectively counter our deeply socialized obliviousness, both criteria are still limited to the individual and do not prevent the myriad ways in which society grants privilege to whites automatically and at both individual and institutional levels, regardless of their personal desires.

Dynamic Five: Denies Collective Socialization and the Power of Dominant Culture (Media, Education, Religion, etc.) to Shape our Perspectives and Ideology

Individuality allows us to present ourselves as unique and original, outside of socialization and unaffected by the relentless racial messages we receive on a daily basis from films, advertising, textbooks, teachers, relatives, shared stories, silence, the absence of information, segregated schools and neighborhoods, and countless other dimensions of social life. Individualism, which places us outside of culture and history, is further developed and refined through modern-day advertising and consumerism, which depends on this conceptualization (Holtzman, 2000). Individualism helps us maintain the illusion that we are unaffected by media, and that our consumer choices reflect our unique tastes and preferences. At the same time, we believe that the brands we have been conditioned to use represent us and make us special (Kilbourne, 1999). Advertisers certainly see us as group members with specific and predictable patterns, and have effectively built a multi-billion dollar industry on these patterns (Heath, 2001). Advertisers need us to see ourselves as individuals who are unaffected by the culture around us in order to maintain the illusion of free choice. The irony of advertising, of course, is that this sense of free choice is necessary precisely in order to manipulate group behavior (Kilbourne, 1999).

White denial of ourselves as socialized group members, deeply affected by images and discourses that circulate in the culture, is also necessary to hold domination in place, for it ensures that these discourses will affect our relations while remaining unexamined (Apple, 2004; Van Dijk, 1992). Individualism prevents whites from being able to think critically about the messages we receive. If we cannot think critically about these messages, we cannot challenge them and our racial conditioning continues unchecked. Individualism exempts people from the forces of socialization and reinforces the idea of personal objectivity.

Dynamic Six: Functions as Neo-Colorblindness and Reproduces the Myth of Meritocracy

If we use the line of reasoning that we are all individuals and social categories such as race, class, and gender do not matter and are just "labels" that stereotype and limit us, then it follows that we all end up in our own "natural" places. Those at the top are merely a collection of individuals who rose under their own individual merits, and those at the bottom are there due to individual deficiencies. Group membership is thereby rendered inoperative and racial disparities are seen as the result of essential character attributes rather than the result of consistent structural barriers. Via Individualism, it is either "just a fluke" that those at the top are a very homogenous collection of individuals, or else white, middle- and upper-class men and sometimes women are consistently "the cream of the crop" (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Brown, 2005). According to Individualism, white privilege is not a factor because we do not see color anyway (i.e., color-blindness); we see each person as a unique individual and we treat him or her as such. This ideology is particularly popular with white teachers (Sleeter, 1993). Thus the Discourse of Individualism not only upholds the myth of meritocracy that success is the result of ability and hard work, but also upholds the belief in the overall superiority of those at the top (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Wise, 2005). Individualism naturalizes the social order and relations of inequality (Billig, 2001).

Unfortunately, many studies show that we do not actually see each person as a unique individual, even when that is our intention (see for example Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004; Darity & Mason, 1998; Goldin & Rouse, 2000). A common statement from those who profess Individualism and are opposed to programs to support under-represented candidates is that they would hire the best person for the job regardless of their color (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). Yet we may believe we are not seeing (or at least ignoring) a candidate's race but we are not actually doing that in practice. For example, in a 2005 study, 5,000 fictitious resumes were sent in response to help-wanted ads. Typically white-sounding names (e.g., Emily Walsh or Greg Baker) were randomly assigned to half the resumes and typically African American-sounding names to the other half (e.g.,

Lakisha Washington or Jamal Jones). White-sounding applicants received 50% more callbacks, regardless of the industry, occupation, or employer size (Wessel, 2005). The resume screeners would likely state that they were not responding to the resumes based on race, and possibly would not be consciously aware that they were. However, the names triggered unconscious racial frameworks that resulted in the resumes being interpreted differently. The screeners are not a special group —dominant culture socializes all of us collectively into racial frameworks that favor whites (Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2002).

Anyone who has had a conversation about race or hiring in the workplace has likely heard the common assumption that all people of color got their jobs (unfairly) via affirmative action programs. In my years as a workplace diversity trainer, I have rarely heard a white person assume that the person of color really was the most qualified. More common is a deep-seated resentment that the person got the job that rightfully belonged to the white person doing the complaining. The assumption is that people of color are inherently unqualified for jobs that are of interest to whites (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). This reveals the core contradiction between our desire to see ourselves as people who *would* hire the most qualified person regardless of race if there were one, and the deeply internalized belief that the only qualified people are white.

Dynamic Seven: Individualism, as Well as Universalism, is Only Culturally Available to the Dominant Group

Whites are taught to see their perspectives as objective and representative of reality (Dyer, 1997). The belief in objectivity, coupled with positioning white people as outside of race, and thus the norm for humanity, allows whites to view themselves as universal humans who can represent all of human experience. Within this construction, people of color can only represent their own racialized experience. Dyer (1997) states, “The claim to power is the claim to speak for the commonality of humanity. Raced people can't do that—they can only speak for their race. But non-raced people can, for they do not represent the interests of a race” (p. 2). Universalism is evidenced through an unracialized identity or location which functions as a kind of blindness, an inability to think about whiteness as an identity or as a “state” of being that would or could have an impact on one’s life. In this position, the significance of being white is not recognized or named by white people, and a universal reference point is assumed (Frankenberg, 2001). I refer to this as the Discourse of Universalism, and it functions similarly to the Discourse of Individualism, but instead of declaring that we all need to see each other as individuals (everyone is different), the person declares that we all need to see each other as human beings (everyone is the same) (DiAngelo, 2006a). Of course we are all humans and I am not critiquing Universalism in general, but when applied to racism, Universalism has similar

effects as Individualism. Once again, the significance of race and the advantages of being white are denied. Further, Universalism assumes that whites and people of color have the same reality, the same experiences in the same context (i.e., "I feel comfortable in this primarily white classroom, so you must too"), the same responses from others, and—like Individualism—assumes that the same doors are open (Ellsworth, 1997).

Whites invoke these seemingly contradictory discourses—we are either all unique or we are all the same—interchangeably (DiAngelo, 2004). Both discourses work to deny white privilege and the significance of race. Further, on the cultural level, being an individual or being a human outside of a racial group is a social position only afforded to white people. In other words, people of color are almost always seen as "having a race" and described in racial terms (e.g., "a black man," "a black film director"), whereas whites are rarely defined by race (e.g., "a man," "a film director"), thereby allowing whites to see themselves as objective and non-racialized (Dyer, 1997; Mills, 1999; Schick, 2004). In turn, being seen (and seeing ourselves) as individuals outside of race frees whites from the psychic burden of race in a wholly racialized society (Frankenberg, 2001; Morrison, 1992). Race and racism become *their* problem, not *ours* (Jensen, 2005; Wise, 2007).

Dynamic Eight: Makes Collective Action Difficult

Given the ideology of Individualism, we see ourselves as different from one another and expect others to see us as different too. Not having a group consciousness, whites often respond defensively when associated with other whites, feeling unfairly generalized and "accused" of benefiting from racism (Picower, 2009). Individualism prevents us from seeing ourselves as responsible for or accountable to other whites as members of a shared racial group who collectively profit from racism. Individualism allows whites to distance themselves from the actions of their racial group and demand to be granted the benefit of the doubt, as individuals, in all cases (DiAngelo, 2006a). As individuals, we are not each other's problems and we leave people of color in the position to challenge other white people. Challenging white people is much more difficult for people of color to do, for when people of color challenge whites they are often dismissed with a variety of accusations including: playing the race card, having a chip on their shoulder, seeing race in everything, or being oversensitive or angry (Applebaum, 2003; Bonilla-Silva, 2006). When whites break racial solidarity and speak up to challenge racism, while it is difficult and rife with social risks, we are still seen as more credible, more objective, and the resistance is less painful because it does not trigger a lifetime of racial invalidation (Schick, 2004; Sue, 2003). Given that whites hold social and institutional power and benefit from racism, racism is essentially a white problem and we need to take

collective action for and among ourselves (Akintunde, 1999; Katz, 2003; Wise, 2007).

Why Couldn't Sue and Bill Hear Me?

White people in North America live in a social environment that protects and insulates them from race-based stress.[2] Fine (1997) identifies this insulation when she observes "how Whiteness accrues privilege and status; gets itself surrounded by protective pillows of resources and/or benefits of the doubt; how Whiteness repels gossip and voyeurism and instead demands dignity" (p. 57). Whites are rarely without these "protective pillows," and when they are, it is usually temporary and by choice. This insulated environment of racial privilege builds White expectations for racial comfort while at the same time lowering the ability to tolerate racial discomfort. For many whites, the only times they encounter a direct challenge to their racial viewpoints are through mandatory in-services in the workplace that are isolated and infrequent, or a required course in college, or rare feedback from a person of color. Because whites are generally protected from these challenges, racial stress results from an interruption to what is racially familiar. Bourdieu's (1993) concept of habitus may be useful here. According to Bourdieu, habitus is a socialized subjectivity, a set of dispositions which generate practices and perceptions. As such, habitus only exists in, through, and because of the practices of actors and their interactions with each other and with the rest of their environment. Based on the previous conditions and experiences that produce it, habitus produces and reproduces thoughts, perceptions, expressions, and actions (i.e., discourses). Strategies of response to "disequilibrium" in the habitus are not based on conscious intentionality, but rather result from unconscious dispositions towards practice and depend on the power position the agent occupies in the social structure.

I conceptualize the reduced psycho-social stamina that racial insulation inculcates as "White Fragility" (see DiAngelo, in press). White Fragility is a product of the habitus, a response or "condition" produced and reproduced by the continual social and material advantages of the white structural position. White Fragility is a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves. These moves include the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, cognitive dissonance, and leaving the stress-inducing situation. These behaviors, in turn, function to reinstate white racial equilibrium (DiAngelo, 2009).

Many whites, such as Sue and Bill, depend on the model of Individualism to maintain racial equilibrium by inscribing their racial innocence and positioning themselves as standing outside of hierarchical social relations. At stake are very

real resources that have concrete effects on people's lives. Also at stake is our very identity—a sense of ourselves as fair, open-minded, and hard working. Thus, whites who are explicitly opposed to racism, as I believe Sue and Bill are, often organize their efforts around a denial of the racially based privileges they hold that reinforce racist disadvantage for others (Marty, 1999). What is particularly problematic about this contradiction is that white moral objection to racism so often increases white resistance to acknowledging complicity with it and thereby works to protect and maintain it. The Discourse of Individualism allows a way out of this contradiction. If we can sustain a denial of ourselves as members of groups, social inequity and its consequences become personally moot (Trepagnier, 2007), and so too does any imperative to change this inequity.

There is another dimension of the interaction I had with Sue that is a function of White Fragility: the lack of humility in providing "the answer" to racism. In the context of racism and white privilege, white racial humility must be developed and is thus a psycho-social skill (DiAngelo, 2009). Because most whites have not been trained to think with complexity about racism, and because it benefits white dominance not to do so, we have a very limited understanding of it (Kumashiro, 2009; LaDuke, 2009). We are the least likely to see, comprehend, or be invested in validating people of color's assertions of racism and being honest about their consequences (King, 1991). At the same time, because of white social, economic, and political power within a white dominant culture, whites are the group in the position to legitimize people of color's assertions of racism. Being in this position engenders a form of racial arrogance, and in this racial arrogance, whites have little compunction about debating the knowledge of people who *have* thought deeply about race through research, study, peer-reviewed scholarship, deep and on-going critical self-reflection, interracial relationships, and lived experience (Chinnery, 2008). This expertise is often trivialized and countered with simplistic platitudes, such as "people just need to see each other as individuals" or "see each other as humans" or "take personal responsibility."

White lack of racial humility often leads to declarations of disagreement when in fact the problem is that we do not understand. Whites generally feel free to dismiss informed perspectives rather than have the humility to acknowledge that they are unfamiliar, reflect on them further, seek more information, or sustain a dialogue (DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2009). My co-facilitator and I do not claim that we were the sole authorities on racism in Sue and Bill's workshop, and we do not ask for blind allegiance from participants. But we can, and did, ask participants to be willing to grapple with the concepts we presented, rather than strive to maintain the perspectives they already held.

It would be disingenuous for me to offer suggestions beyond this analysis on how to engage the Sues and Bills we encounter in our anti-racist endeavors as

this is difficult, complex, and oftentimes deeply discouraging work. What I have found, however, is that the more sustained analysis of this discourse that I can provide from an anti-racist framework, the more I have been able to critically engage resistant whites. To that end, I offer this analysis to provide a concise yet complex list of dynamics Individualism obscures, in hopes that it may be useful to others engaged in anti-racist work.

Conclusion

The disavowal of race as an organizing factor is necessary to support current structures of inequity and domination for without it, the correlation between the distribution of social resources and unearned white privilege would be plainly evident (Billig, 2001; Flax, 1999; Mills, 1999). The visibility of structural inequality destabilizes the claim that privilege is simply a reflection of hard work and virtue. Therefore, inequality must be hidden or justified as resulting from lack of effort (McIntosh, 2004; Ryan, 2001). Individualism accomplishes both of these tasks. Flax (1999) argues that when the individual is considered the basic unit of society, the problem of race is understood within the rubric of inclusion or exclusion. In other words, there are no structural barriers; the issue at hand is simply a matter of including or "letting one in." Inclusion is made possible by demonstrating individual worth and is displayed through such virtues as decency, discipline, and hard work. If one proves worthy via these virtues, they may be included. If they do not prove worthy, their exclusion is rationalized as the result of their own poor choices or lack of virtues. This approach allows no possibility for questioning the reference point from which that worth is judged. The dominant narrative, supported by these normative rules, stipulates that the social context is representative, objective, and fair.

One day, Individualism may be the "answer" to racism, realized, but it is precisely because that day is not a reality that the Discourse of Individualism is so pernicious. Given that Individualism is not a current racial reality, positioning oneself as operating from it, as Sue and Bill did, is patently false and delusional, and can only function to support and protect white privilege (King, 1991). While white privilege plays out somewhat differently for whites depending on the intersections of our other identities, such as class, gender, religion, sexual orientation, or ability, it is still always at play. For example, as a woman who grew up in poverty, I learned my place in the racial order differently than a middle-class white woman learned hers, but I still learned it—we were below other whites, but always above people of color (DiAngelo, 2006a).

My class position is only one social location from which I learned to collude with racism. It is the task of each of us to explore how white privilege and racism inform our lives. To this end, the constructive use of Individualism for whites is to

ask ourselves how racism and white privilege has played out specifically for us based on all of our other identities and experiences. For example, as a white woman, how did I internalize racial superiority through the culture's representation of white women as the embodiment of ultimate beauty? What has it meant for me to have a key signifier of female perfection—whiteness—available to me? How have images of white women in the careers deemed valuable for women shaped my goals? How has the presentation of white women's history as "women's history" rendered women of color invisible to me? How have all of these messages ultimately set me up to collude in the oppression of people of color? By asking questions such as these I have been able to gain a much deeper and more useful analysis of racism. Rather than discovering that acknowledging the collective dimensions of white experience denies my individuality, it has been a profound way to address the unique complexity of all my social identities. It is through this conceptualization of the individual—an entity rooted in the larger matrix of socio-historical location and power relations—that I wish to engage Sue and Bill.

Notes

[1] Race is a deeply complex socio-political system whose boundaries shift and adapt over time (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). As such, I recognize that "white" and "people of color" are not discrete categories, and that within these groupings are other levels of complexity and difference based on the various roles assigned by dominant society at various times (i.e., Asian vs. Black vs. Latino). However, for the purposes of this limited analysis, I use these terms to indicate the two general, socially recognized divisions of the racial hierarchy in the U.S.

[2] Although white racial insulation is somewhat mediated by social class (with poor and working class urban whites being generally less racially insulated than suburban or rural whites; DiAngelo, 2006a), the larger social environment insulates and protects whites as a group through institutions, cultural representations, media, school textbooks, movies, advertising, dominant discourses, etc.

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