SITUATING WHITEPAR: THE PRACTICE, PURPOSE, AND POTENTIAL OF PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH WITHIN WHITE ANTI-RACIST PRAXIS

“In order to be effective agents for racial justice, white people must undergo conscientization—a coming to awareness—of the mechanisms of white supremacy… Only when we understand how the system operates and how we are implicated and caught in it can we engage in an informed praxis to disrupt it. For [whites] this means we must develop our own form of emancipatory praxis as white people opposed to white supremacy.” (Case 2004)

The practice of Participatory Action Research is, at its root, a process seeking liberatory ways of knowing. In the burgeoning field, practitioners have engaged in reflexive and collaborative research to engage participants both in knowledge creation and a process of self-actualization necessary to understand and change one’s own social circumstances.

As a liberatory pursuit, action research is most frequently conducted with those existing at the margins to study and disrupt social stratification and oppressive systems operating in their lives. As part of this process, practitioners, who are typically identified with relatively more powerful groups or institutions, have developed a practice of situating themselves within the work, acknowledging their own positionality and place within the relevant power structures (Greenwood and Levin 2007). In this context, the body of PAR literature and practice has a well-developed and robust commentary on the role of power and privilege in the PAR process. Less frequently, however, have PAR practitioners employed the practice to explore the power and privilege of the participants themselves as a means towards liberatory knowledge creation.

In the relatively nascent field of cPAR or racePAR focusing specifically on white racial identity within all-white participant groups, the majority of projects have been conducted in the context of predominantly white educational institutions. The American educational system provides a uniquely dynamic and accessible context for understanding the role of whiteness in interpersonal, institutional, and structural racism, as well as for
identifying particular critical race education strategies as a component of identity formation and professional development. The American teaching force is overwhelmingly white and middle class, despite classrooms rapidly diversifying across the country. Because of the increasingly widening gap between the lived experiences of white teachers and the lived realities of their students, many educators are beginning to rethink instructional strategies and classroom culture. Similarly, as university student bodies continue to diversify, the cultural practices, policies, staff, and faculty of institutions of higher education have lagged far behind. In this context, the field of education is forcing both white educators and students who, “have mono-cultural realities, insulated lives, and immature experiences, to view perspectives that are critical and counter to their own sense of reality” (Hill-Jackson 2007). Furthermore, locating anti-racist work and knowledge creation within educational institutions carries significant symbolic and strategic weight as, “in educational institutions, from kindergartens to doctoral programs, whiteness is pervasive and constitutive…the typical curriculum is tied up in the production, valuation, and distribution of structural, or scientific, knowledge in ways that privilege whiteness” (Allen 2004). Thus, educational institutions are not only dominated by white individuals and cultural practices, but in many senses are in fact the origin of the whiteness construct itself.

In their *Handbook of Action Research*, Reason and Bradbury posit that the primary purpose of action research is to produce practical knowledge that is useful to people in their daily lives (Reason and Bradbury 2008). Here I will explore a number of specific case studies focusing on white teachers and students using PAR to grapple with white identity within their educational contexts, as well as the various epistemological and ethical challenges associated with situating a liberatory or anti-racist practice within privileged space. Ultimately, I pose
that whitePAR constitutes a critical and useful tool in the wider project of disrupting white complicity and dismantling white supremacist systems.

**Scholarly Research on White Privilege**

A discussion of PAR case studies interrogating whiteness and white anti-racist action is best understood as contextualized within the larger body of scholarly discourse on racism and whiteness.

While Black American scholars have studied and written about whiteness since at least the mid-nineteenth century, white scholarship focused on whiteness has only developed within the past 60 years (Cullen 2008). Prior to this time, white scholarship—to the extent that it addressed race or racism in any form—focused primarily on outcomes and victims of racism rather than its perpetrators or perpetuation. Therefore, despite over 100 years of Black thought and political action framing whiteness and racism, the Swedish sociologist Myrdal is largely credited as one of the first *whites* to identify racism not as the problem of the victim, but rather as a “white man’s problem;” a revelation arriving as late as 1944 (Cullen 2008).

Within this understanding, contemporary research and PAR focused on whiteness has dealt largely with the phenomenon known as “white privilege.” Scholarly discourse on white privilege dates back to the early 1970s with the work of Terry (1970) and Blauner (1972) describing a phenomenon of privilege that granted an “unfair advantage, a preferential situation or systemic ‘headstart’ in the pursuit of social values” (Blauner 1972, Cullen 2008). The concept was further and famously socialized in Peggy McIntosh’s 1989 work, “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack,” as a succinct and accessible piece widely used in both formal and popular education contexts to introduce the concept of white racial privilege to white students. Here, McIntosh defines white privilege as a “package of unearned assets which I can count on cashing in each day…an invisible weightless knapsack of special
provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools, and blank checks” (McIntosh 1989). In other words, white privilege is a form of social capital that helps whites navigate institutions more effectively and creates a system of social advantages for whites primarily on the basis of race rather than merit (Cullen 2008).

Critiques of the white privilege scholarship, have also demanded elaboration to contextualize individual privilege within structural white supremacy as the underlying condition that makes white privilege possible (Leonardo 2004). With this understanding, white anti-racist education and whitePAR seek to approach privilege not simply as a ‘state of being’ but rather as a means to understanding the historical and ongoing processes that secure white domination (Cullen 2008). This knowledge generation process must therefore locate whiteness not simply within the individual, but also within the locally specific and wider social order (Levine-Rasky 2000).

WhitePAR scholarship can be understood as situated within this larger body of white scholarship, contributing to the wider theory by engaging white participants in a process of self-understanding about their own privilege and role in the perpetuation of white supremacy within their specific community and institutional contexts.

**Case studies of whitePAR**

Though PAR is typically situated within marginal communities, a number of PAR practitioners have begun to take on the task of engaging in critical race PAR within white communities operating within an educational institutional context, most notably McIntyre (1995) with white teachers, Hytten and Warren (2003) as an extension of McIntye’s study, Kirshman (2006) with white adult educators, Hill-Jackson (2007) with white pre-service teachers, and Cullen (2008) with white graduate students. Though these projects vary in their methods and depth, they all generally seek to facilitate a deepened awareness of white-
privilege and the development of contextually specific strategies for mitigating and dismantling that system of privilege.

In a rather robust case working with graduate students in a student affairs preparation program at Iowa State University, Cullen framed his dissertation project with other white graduate students as three simultaneous action research processes. Due to Cullen’s own white racial identity and status within the academy, he identifies his role not as the “friendly outsider” but rather as an insider in each of these three processes. First, acting as the “ultimate insider”, is his own process of self-improvement as a facilitator of anti-racist education. Secondly, is the co-construction of local knowledge with the group as they inquired into the construct of white privilege. And finally, is an action research process seeking a collective “action outcome” (Cullen 2008). From this three-fold “insider” positionality Cullen asserts that the oft-assumed position of the insider as the sole bearers of truth within action research is deserving of critique, particularly in the context of whitePAR. Rather than owning the single objective “truth,” insiders must be understood to hold but one truth among many. By situating himself and his participants as insiders, Cullen uses whitePAR as a technique for confronting the status quo where, in the theory of Greenwood and Levin, “social actors are forced to come to terms explicitly with their own defensive reactions to changes and perceived threats by inquiring into the causes of those reactions and analyzing the consequences of giving into them” (Greenwood & Levin 2007).

To understand this process of awareness development, Cullen employed three primary methodologies: narrative analysis of a series of interviews, group meetings, and written reflections, a benchmarking tool known as the White Privilege Attitudes Scale, and a PAR group process to collectively examine white racial privilege and develop strategies for action (Cullen 2008).
In conducting pre- and post-process interviews, Cullen focused on a combination of personal, open-ended questions such as “What does it mean for you to be white?” as well as a series of knowledge questions to determine what participants knew about racial equality in the United States and ideologically-loaded terms such as “reverse racism” and “affirmative action.” Together, these were used to understand how participants made sense of their own racial identities as well as their lived experiences of racial difference and diversity training (Cullen 2008). In addition to these pre- and post-interviews, Cullen used Janie Pinterit’s *White Privilege Attitude Scale (WPAS)* to measure “willingness to confront white privilege, apprehensions that flow from addressing white privilege, denial of white privilege, and feeling bad about having white privilege” (Cullen 2008). The final aspect of the project—the group PAR process—was framed by Cullen’s “own sense that awareness of white privilege was a key component in developing an anti-racist identity and that an all-white consciousness-raising PAR group would be an effective format for facilitating white privilege awareness” (Cullen 2008).

**Connecting Freirean Pedagogy, PAR Theory, and White Anti-Racism**

The practice of PAR is deeply connected to Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, namely his theory of conscientization, his rejection of the “banking model” of education, and his belief in critical reflection as essential for individual and social change. Freire’s counterhegemonic approach to knowledge construction within oppressed communities therefore informs many of the strategies employed by practitioners in PAR projects (Freire 1970, McIntyre 2008).

In his work with white graduate students, Cullen adopts the notion that “racism is a problem that whites can and must undo” (Cullen 2008). However this notion may seem initially at odds or significantly problematized by the Freirean claim that “the great and
historical task of the oppressed [is] to liberate themselves and their oppressors as well. The oppressors who oppress, exploit, and rape by virtue of their power cannot find in this power the strength to liberate either the oppressed or themselves” (Freire 1970). According to Freire, the oppressor, so dehumanized by the process of subjugating, is fundamentally incapable of liberating either himself or the other. Any possibility of moving beyond oppressive, patronizing, or falsely generous behavior therefore requires that the oppressor work in “true solidarity” within a liberation practice, as defined by the oppressed themselves. In contemporary white anti-racist praxis, this Frierean concept is translated by practitioners such as Cullen into the notion that “the capacity to change the white power structure rests principally with white Americans working in allied relationships with People of Color” (Cullen 2008). WhitePAR, or what Reason and Bradbury have termed “pedagogy of the privileged,” serves this purpose as a process of reflective action, training, and self-awareness development that enables whites to work more effectively in “solidarity” or “allied relationships” with people of color (P. Reason & Bradbury, 2001).

While the collective interrogation of the white privilege construct lays the foundation for the possibility of solidarity work, Cullen’s additional research goal to develop an “action outcome” prompted an additional methodology not typical of other cPAR or racePAR processes—the inclusion of an external accountability system. To address the common critique that conducting anti-racism work with exclusively white participants carries the “presumption on our part that we can establish an agenda and take action independently from the voices, views, and needs of People of Color,” Cullen’s work included a process for garnering feedback on the action components of the project from a critical outside reference group of People of Color within the same educational institution (Cullen 2008). If this accountability process is given adequate heed, it serves to situate whitePAR within Freirean
pedagogy in that “this lesson and this apprenticeship must come from the oppressed themselves” (Freire 1970).

**White Fragility, Stuckness, and the need for co-constructive anti-racist praxis**

Despite the ethical and logistical challenges of conducting critical race PAR within racially homogenous white groups, this strategy can be both intentional and beneficial to the process of white anti-racist identity formation. In Cullen’s work, engaging in a PAR process with all white participants enables a sense of safety and in-group identification that facilitates a form of “cohesive dialogue marked by authenticity and trust” less possible in racially mixed groups in the early stages of white anti-racist identity formation (Cullen 2008).

This approach is drawn from white anti-racist pedagogical theory originally developed by Katz (1978) who enumerated the reasons for conducting all white consciousness-raising groups as to: “1) establish a climate that focused on the meaning of being white and on developing a sense of whiteness as part of one’s identity, 2) explore their racist attitudes and behaviors in a climate of trust and support, and 3) accomplish this learning without exploiting minority people as the “teachers” (Katz 1978, Cullen 2008).

This practice is highly connected to challenge of addressing what has become known as “White Fragility” in whiteness theory. “White Fragility,” as conceptualized by DiAngelo (2011) describes a state where white people in North America who have been insulated from race-based stress are unable to tolerate even small amounts of racial stress without triggering a range of defensive moves such as “anger, fear, and guilt…argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation. These behaviors, in turn, function to reinstate white racial equilibrium” (DiAngelo 2011). White Fragility and the expectation of racial comfort, though rooted in entitlement, can still be counterproductive to learning processes because “whites have not had to build the cognitive or affective skills or develop the stamina that
would allow for constructive engagement across racial divides” (DiAngelo 2011). In other words, in the early stages of awareness development, whites may be somatically *incapable* of receptivity and learning in racially mixed spaces, often to the deepest detriment to the people of color in the space. To combat this dynamic, DiAngelo calls for all white people to “build the stamina to sustain conscious and explicit engagements with race” and this may begin through a practice with other white people in a space of greater perceived safety (DiAngelo 2011).

In addition to mitigating White Fragility, whitePAR—as distinct from other white anti-racist education tactics—is a powerful tool for addressing what is often described as “stuckness” resulting from increased awareness of white privilege and lack of clarity as to what can be done about it (D’Andrea and Daniels 1999). Through a commitment to co-constructive knowledge creation, participants are able to move into a space of knowing privilege differently than is possible with banking models of education or traditional social science research. This dynamic was borne out as Cullen moved through the PAR process and the group was able to transition from being “taught through structured, facilitated experiences” to become “more open-ended, democratic, and participative as group members came into their own as knowers” (Cullen 2008). Ultimately, based on their own internal process and conversations with the external accountability group of People of Color, Cullen’s participants developed and publically published personal action plans for the week, month, and year following the completion of the project, moving through “stuckness” and towards a state of action.

**Situating whitePAR Within Critical Pedagogy**

WhitePAR is powerful and distinct from general white anti-racist theory or education precisely because it is context-specific and conducted with the objective of co-producing
strategies to disrupt white racial privilege in the immediate settings of the participants. As with other constructivist, qualitative research and the larger body of PAR theory, whitePAR findings should not be considered generalizable. Nor should white experience be understood as monolithic. While existing whitePAR has dealt primarily with educated, middle class white participants, White Fragility and resistance to white anti-racism exists partially because whiteness has been the primary social capital vested to otherwise disenfranchised poor, under-educated, or rural white Americans (Allen 2004). WhitePAR can’t therefore treat all whiteness equally. As with other forms of cPAR, whitePAR must also be context-specific and intersectional. Thus, while understanding the manifestations of white privilege and white supremacy in the culture writ large is of critical importance, whitePAR is particularly well situated to critically facilitate white participants in a process of reorganizing their intimate knowledge of specific communities and enacting change within their own spheres of influence.

Finally, while race constitutes one of the most socially meaningful identity categories in American society, class, gender, sexual orientation, and ability, among many others also structure institutional and interpersonal relationships. WhitePAR may therefore serve as but one entry point into a wider practice of PrivilegePAR, in which practitioners and participants explore and make actionable the disruption of all forms of social privilege in the places where they live, work, play and learn. Ultimately, the explicit inclusion and centering of privilege in PAR means to serve the work of critical pedagogy and collective knowledge construction as liberatory political action.
Works Cited


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