(MIS-)Education into American Racism

by Linda J. Lin – 2007

Background: Traditional approaches to race in the United States have located race in individuals and groups and reduced the ambiguities of interaction to differences in attitudes, levels of awareness, and stages of identity development. Alternatively, locating race in social stratification has made it an over-determined product of inequalities in job opportunities, the educational system, housing, and so on. Purpose: In this paper I shift the analytical focus to the production of race in face-to-face interaction, examining interaction as a process of (mis-)education into American racism. Based on fieldwork in a school reform organization that institutionalized race conversations, I show how people try to engage one another on matters of race, resist one another’s efforts, and teach one another over time—however unintentionally—to avoid talking about race with one another.

Research Design: This case study draws on eight months of ethnographic fieldwork from December 2003 to July 2004. I attended staff meetings in a nonprofit school reform organization and in affiliated schools, taking notes, collecting site documents, conducting interviews, and talking informally with people in schools and in the organization. I tell a series of stories told to me about a professional development activity called “the capes,” an activity apparently designed to surface racial trouble. I examine what was said about race, to whom, and when, taking the telling of stories as my unit of. This analytical move allows me to draw together the varied experiences of the people in the organization, my own experience as a researcher, and the reader’s experience to show how people attempt to transform one another in interaction.

Findings and Conclusion: I argue that “learning about race” is less a matter of individual effort and goodwill than a messy process of negotiating the ambiguities and dangers of social interaction. I conclude that we must account for these local constraints in order to find viable possibilities for transforming the conditions of our everyday lives.

(MIS-)EDUCATION INTO AMERICAN RACISM

How do people of goodwill who set out to work on American inequalities find out that race relentlessly divides them? I conducted fieldwork in a nonprofit school reform organization dedicated to “closing the achievement gap” in California public schools. For relatively low pay and status, people who join this organization commit two or more years of their lives to improving the standardized test scores of “low-income students of color and English Language Learners.” These are the people who acknowledge racial and class inequalities and work to remedy them—those who strive to “turn talk into action.” But goodwill, commitment, and hard work do not preclude conflict across racial lines. Race seems so dangerous that talking about it routinely catalyzes what people in this organization call “explosions.” Efforts to “build community” and repair the damage seem to make matters worse. Before the end of the academic year, the executive director puts an end to race conversations, and nobody objects, at least within my hearing. The people who educate me about how race divides them have also learned to avoid talking about race with one another.

This case may not appear surprising to those concerned with race and racism in the United States, whether in the social sciences, in policy-making, or in program development. That race still matters is not news. It has become common sense to say that race is a social construction and that Americans should pay closer attention to how race is constructed. But these statements often do not lead to sustained focus on the very construction of race, on the ongoing history of a small group of people brought together and pulled apart, and certainly not on a group which has purposively come together to work at deconstructing race. Thus, in this paper I examine how and when people make race relevant in their everyday interactions and how they transform each other.1 To this extent, this is a paper about education, or perhaps mis-education, given the mutually unsatisfactory outcomes for everyone involved.

AN INTERACTIONAL APPROACH

How to approach race in the United States is a compelling analytical question, particularly as researchers become more aware of the limitations of the more traditional approaches. On one hand, we have located race (and racism) in individuals or groups and reduced the ambiguities of interaction to differences in racial attitudes, levels of awareness, and stages in identity development. On the other hand, we have located race in social stratification and made it an over-determined product of inequalities in job opportunities, the educational system, housing markets, banking, health care, and the legal system. Both approaches overlook the nuances and uncertainties of how race matters in face-to-face interaction. We need theoretical approaches that take into account the complexities of negotiating race in everyday life and reveal race as dynamic, changing from moment to moment as people build social worlds together in everyday interaction. Thus, I look at the ever-changing ways in which people work to make sense of and transform the social realities they build together: the anxieties, pressures, and tensions that make up their everyday lives. Locating race in the patterning of local interaction opens new possibilities for better descriptions of the settings in which race is made to matter, when it matters, how it is made to matter, by whom and for what purposes. Building on Schegloff’s methodological injunction not to predetermine what is socially consequential and when (1991), Favret-Saad’s analysis of the ways things are said (1977), Wieder’s analytical move from the convict code to its telling as consequential (1974), and McDermott and Varenne’s cultural approach to the construction of disability (1995), I show in this paper what an interactional approach might yield.


An interactional analysis of race in the United States must begin with the anxiety and uncertainty people experience. But focusing on racialized uncertainty and anxiety can easily bring us back to a concern with psychological states, and particularly with what people (do not) know about racism. What we (do not) know is then put forward as the cause for the difficulty we experience. Noticing uncertainty and anxiety as produced in interaction leads me instead to look for the ways in which people teach one another about racism, resist this teaching, and propose and preclude alternate possibilities. Thus, I look at the maintenance of American racism as a process of mis-education.

I want to take a moment to clarify what I mean by “American racism.” As I suggest above, I am not interested in identifying individuals in my fieldwork as “racist” and thus the cause of trouble. Nor do I focus on stratification in the organization as “racist” and deterministic of conflict. Instead I look at how people who work to undo racism come to know, and teach me about, how they are divided as “White” and “people of color” as an instantiation of American racism. This includes the traditional approaches to race as located in individuals and social structure, for current research on race is readily available to, and taken up by, the people in my fieldwork.

To look at interaction as education into racism, I emphasize that my work—an interactional process itself—is an educational endeavor about an educational endeavor. I document the education people constructed for one another, the education they helped develop for me as my fieldwork unfolded, and the education I attempt to build with the reader. I do this through a case study based on something people in my fieldwork called “the capes,” a professional development activity that makes race acutely visible. Rather than focusing on the activity itself, I examine its telling: the ways in which I was instructed about it, and the ways in which I instruct the reader about it.

I show how people are educated into race in interaction with one another through their accounts of their experiences, but I do not simply report what they tell me. I also show how the telling of their experiences constitutes my own education into race as an observant participant and researcher. This article forms a third strand: how the reader finds out the interactional possibilities and constraints in and around race. I trace these three strands through the telling of the capes. The story of “what really happened” changed depending on who was doing the telling, to whom, when, and under what circumstances. Through these multiple tellings over time, I trace my own process of finding out about race in interaction. In retelling these stories to the reader and, more precisely, in examining the telling of these stories, I frame the reader’s experience of finding out how race matters. By bringing together these three strands, I illustrate what might be gained by approaching race talk as a (mis-)educative process.

This paper focuses on five tellings of something that happened in the beginning of the school year as new interns were brought into the organization. The story of the capes was told to newcomers (such as myself) as illustrative of racialized conflict among current members of the organization. It seems that the story was also told to instruct listeners on how to interpret the ongoing racial conflict. Two things struck me about the telling of the capes. First, I heard the story from the various sides of the racial divide(s): from those identified in the organization as “White,” from those identified as “people of color,” and from those who did not fit neatly into either category. This event seemed to make race visible to almost everyone, while other events were meaningful only to a few people. Secondly, although people told this story months after it had happened, they told it with an emotional urgency as if it had just happened. I retell this story to the reader five times, in the order they occurred. With each telling, my understanding deepens—and so does the story I tell the reader.

“AN ORGANIZATION THAT THINKS RACE MATTERS”

To contextualize the scenes of the tellings, I begin by giving some background on the organization. The mission of the organization, according to promotional material, is as follows:

…to support high-poverty schools to close the gap in achievement between the highest- and lowest-performing student groups and achieve educational excellence for all students, regardless of race, socio-economic status, or other designation.

Closing “the gap,” as some found to their dismay, was narrowly defined as raising standardized test scores of African American and Latino elementary school students on language arts. The organization placed teams of interns into schools to work with teachers and principals in developing and implementing strategies for “whole-school reform.” These included “inquiry cycles” for teachers to examine and reflect on their own teaching, “lab classrooms” for teachers to observe one another’s teaching, rearranging schedules and space to encourage collaboration within and across grade levels, developing “internal leadership” by recruiting teachers to leadership committees, and “racial professional development” for teachers, such as race conversations in voluntary “study groups” and in mandatory staff meetings. Interns worked in schools under the supervision of permanent staff members for four days a week. The fifth day was reserved for their professional development through eight-hour meetings organized by permanent staff members.

During the year of my fieldwork, nineteen interns were assigned to five teams working in seven schools. Eleven were second-year interns, having joined the organization a year earlier than the eight first-year interns and myself. The twentieth intern, also a second-year, worked in the office to facilitate communication across the five teams and between interns and permanent staff members. Interns, all recent college graduates, signed two-year contracts at a salary of less than $20,000 per year in one of the most expensive areas in the country. At the end of their contract, most were expected to leave the organization to pursue careers in education or other social services.

Ten permanent staff members supervised the interns and ran the organization, raising money, maintaining operations, and cultivating relationships with more schools and school districts. They enjoyed much higher salaries and better benefits than the interns, although some staff members reportedly enjoyed much higher salaries than others. Interns and low-level staff members often speculated on the salaries of higher-paid employees. An intern privately told me that a leader known for frequently complaining that he would have made more money as a doctor must make “a good amount of money. I notice his clothes.” Getting into the spirit, I added, “His car.” She smiled. “His car—zz. The Beemer, and the GMC Envoy.” With a luxury sedan and a sport utility vehicle, the leader got little sympathy from someone who turned down more lucrative offers to make less than the living wage for the area (Economic Policy Institute, 2002).

While promotional literature and enthusiastic leaders described the organization as “diverse,” some people routinely referred to it as a “white organization” or a “white-led organization,” particularly when complaining of exclusion from decision-making processes. In private...
conversations and occasionally in “explosions,” they cited elitism, nepotism, race, and wealth to explain patterns in whose voice was “heard,” who was promoted, who held leadership positions, and who left the organization for which reasons. Other people also invoked race and passion in private conversations to describe the organization as dominated by “people of color” who “get to speak,” whose “stories are validated,” and who openly favor candidates of color over “middle-class,” “professional” candidates for next year’s cohort of interns.

At this point, the reader may readily identify those who made these comments in racial terms: the speakers of the first set of comments as “persons of color” and speakers of the second set as “White.” Assuming a relationship between racial identification and the content of the complaints could appear unproblematic, particularly since the people in the organization themselves make this association, as might the “typical” American readers addressed by American research on American racism. However, I argue that the identification is a kind of interactional work that produces the dichotomy of people of color/White. One consequence of this work, among others, is to make it easy to overlook people whom I call, for lack of a better term, “ambiguously raced.” These are people who would qualify for affirmative action on the basis of federally recognized categories, such as White, Black or African American, Hispanic or Latino, Asian, and Some Other Race. They talk about organizational “diversity” as constricting, based on simplistic and essentialist categories that do not have room for them: a Latino from a working-class, heavily Latino neighborhood who expresses socially conservative views; a woman of Chinese ancestry whose family lived in Vietnam for generations before immigrating to Philadelphia; and a middle-class, mixed-race man with a degree from an elite university recognized as a “person of color” by “White” people but not by “people of color” whose racial authenticity was questioned less than his. As for me, I would be classified for federal purposes as Asian and positioned in the organization as “ambiguously raced.” Whether I was more “white” or “of color” depended, it seemed, on what got to decide and under what conditions. Perhaps this was based on my constant transgression of color lines: insisting, despite discouragement, on talking with and taking seriously both “White people” (including White-affiliated Asian Americans) and “people of color.”

I conducted fieldwork in this organization from December 2003 to July 2004. I attended the weekly professional development meetings and biweekly staff meetings, participating in discussions and taking notes. I observed goings-on in the main office, such as interviews with job candidates. I visited interns and supervisors at their school sites, focusing on two of the seven schools. At the schools, I attended team meetings and faculty meetings, and participated in school events such as a celebration of César Chavez Day. At the schools and in the main office I collected site documents, conducted interviews, and had informal chats with teachers, students, interns, and staff members.

WHEN IS RACE?

A problem in analyzing racialized interaction is finding out when and how race matters. How is race meaningful in “an organization that thinks race matters,” as a leader describes it, among people who think race matters? Does race always matter? Does it matter more when there is conflict? Or is race obscuring more fundamental problems? A staff member comments, “Everything is looking like race. Even when it isn’t.” People in the organization continually work to figure out when and how race matters in their interactions with one another, and what to do about it.

One way to find out when and how race matters is to ask people. As a researcher known to be interested in race conversations, I did so. Not surprisingly, the accounts of how race mattered in the organization and in American society seemed to contradict one another. Rather than taking what people told me as truth, or trying to sift truth from conflicting accounts, I look at the telling of stories as the unit of analysis—specifically, the telling itself as educative of a researcher on how race matters.

In this paper, I identify participants only in terms of race and position, such as “White intern” or “African-American staff member.” I identify people racially since I have made my research about race, and I do so based on what would be uncontroversial for them to do while, for example, filling out a questionnaire about minority status. This does some injury to the people involved, as they tended to use given names when telling the stories, without racial identifications (although some spoke abstractly about “whiteness” or unnamed “people of color”). For a Vietnamese-Chinese American intern who repeatedly objected to having to identify herself with the available racial or ethnic categories, the racial identifications I make in this paper may feel like a violation—although not an unfamiliar one. Nor do people “have” fixed or easily recognizable identities. For example, the Vietnamese-Chinese American intern was recognizable as Vietnamese to people familiar with Vietnamese names, but not recognizable as Chinese until she revealed her ethnic background. By using racial and ethnic identifiers, rather than names or symbols, I could be accused of being one of those who make race “more important than it really is,” or, in the staff member’s words, making “everything look like race even when it isn’t.” But, in this particular context, the issue is not the “true” level of racialization in the organization or in the United States is. The issue is positioning this particular paper, as an educating piece, in the larger public conversation on race in the United States. Moreover, readers do not have ready access to the phenotypic or biographical information available to people in the organization, nor to the ways in which they became racially recognizable to one another in interaction.

The category “Asian American” offers a compelling illustration of the contingent nature of racial identity. At the institutional level, “Asians” were sometimes grouped with White people, for example, when describing the achievement gap, and sometimes with people of color, for example when celebrating the organization’s diversity. At the interactional level, the “racial” status of individual Asian Americans in the organization seemed to depend on whether they consistently sided with “the White people,” “the people of color,” or both or neither (leaving them “ambiguously raced”). Occasionally Asian Americans were treated as neither white or “of color,” as when a White leader once described their role in a scene of racialized conflict: “The Asians stayed out of it, let us do our thing.” Some people who identified themselves as Asian Americans objected to the term “Asian”—a term commonly used in promotional literature and by non-Asian Americans—while, for example, filling out a questionnaire about minority status. This does some injury to the people involved, as they tended to use given names when telling the stories, without racial identifications (although some spoke abstractly about “whiteness” or unnamed “people of color”). For a Vietnamese-Chinese American intern who repeatedly objected to having to identify herself with the available racial or ethnic categories, the racial identifications I make in this paper may feel like a violation—although not an unfamiliar one. Nor do people “have” fixed or easily recognizable identities.

That I have only briefly mentioned class reflects its infrequent use in organizational discourse. In some cases, people seemed to imply class differences when using racial categories. For example, discussions of the organization as “white” or “white-led” often involved references to leaders’ elite educations, family wealth, and communication styles as markers of difference. At other times, people talked about race without seeming to consider or invoke class. For example, when leaders spoke of organizational diversity they did not seem to consider that
many of the “people of color” came from comfortable middle-class backgrounds and had little experience in the “communities” the organization purported to serve. Class did not show up explicitly in the telling of the cape activity, at least those in which I was involved, but this does not mean that people did not consider class relevant to what happened in the scene and in subsequent interaction.

THE CAPE ACTIVITY

I first heard about the capes in April 2004, after observing (and thus participating in) months of relentless racial conflict. The cape activity occurred on September 12, 2003, over two months before I began visiting the organization regularly. For the first few months, I heard little about how race mattered in the organization beyond the official version: here in this diverse organization we’re all working together to close the achievement gap. The implication seemed to be that race was a problem in schools, but not in the organization. When I asked, people often skirted the issue, pleading ignorance or redirecting me to another topic. But once I became implicated in racial conflict, along with everyone else, people began to tell me about their troubles with race in the organization. One of the stories they told me was the story of the “capes.”

With each telling I found out more about what happened, in the activity itself and subsequently, as interpretations of what happened continued to resonate in organizational life. As I found out more, I slowly shifted positions, from a newcomer who knew little about race in this context, to someone who found out a great deal about “what really happened” as it mattered over time. Although I did not observe the activity, I became directly involved in the various ways in which “what really happened” was taken up and used to make sense of the ongoing ambiguities of everyday life.

Telling #1, April 27

Over lunch in a Thai restaurant, an African American intern shared with me her frustration that people in the organization “don’t want to name things. I want to name things.” For example, she wanted to talk about the disproportionately high number of African American boys shunted to special education classes. The ways in which African Americans perpetuate racism. How to talk about race, racism, and internalized racism without being condescending. When she brought up these issues, she told me, nobody would engage with them.

Then she told me a little about the trouble on her team. Given what we had just talked about, it seemed to me that race mattered in this situation as well. Her teammates—a White woman, a Filipina woman who counted two White interns as close friends, and a Vietnamese-Chinese American resistant to categorizing herself racially or ethnically—went to higher-ups to complain about her rather than working things through with her. In doing so, they bypassed their African American supervisor to talk with his manager, who was White. The African American intern lamented the uncomfortable dynamic in team meetings. “They make me a bad guy,” she told me sadly. And it wasn’t just her—her teammates were also having trouble with their supervisor, and instead of working things through with him, they complained about him to his manager.

At this point she began to tell me the story of the capes. The cape activity was a professional development session in the beginning of the school year. An African American supervisor, who had facilitated race conversations the previous week, gave people large sheets of butcher paper to hang over their backs as “capes.” They were instructed to write their first impressions of one another on these capes. The point of the activity, it seems, was to learn that people convey racial information whether they intend to or not, and that this racial information can affect working relationships.

When people took off their capes, several were upset at what was written on them. One person found “white girl” written on her cape. Another person found “really white” written on her cape. “Whitewashed” was written on a third cape, and “talks white” on a fourth. Apparently, an African American staff member known for his chipper attitude (not the facilitator) told people, “Take risks, keep trying.”

My immediate reaction was to feel that I understood better the “explosion” that had happened only weeks before. This organization wasn’t a place where one could actually talk about race. I thought. People couldn’t handle being confronted with how others thought of them racially, and the consequences were still reverberating. I also felt a twinge of sympathy with the recipients. Anonymous comments literally written behind their backs seemed a painful and humiliating way to find out that people read them as racially inauthentic, as oblivious, as having an inflated sense of entitlement, perhaps even as racist. At the same time, it seemed germane that anonymity was required before anyone could broach race as it already mattered.

Telling #2, May 5

The plot thickened about a week later, when I told an abbreviated version of the story I had heard to an African American staff member. She was also a relative newcomer to the organization, having joined after the cape activity. She had been hired to replace an African American supervisor who, it seems, was to learn that people convey racial information whether they intend to or not, and that this racial information can affect working relationships.

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The supervisor who facilitated the activity, she told me, wanted to do something to address these tensions already in play. I took this to mean that the supervisor had designed the activity specifically for her interns, to give interns of color an opportunity to say what needed to be said, and to enlist their help in teaching the White interns (and possibly some Asian American interns) about how race operates, often against one’s best intentions.
With this telling I found out that the trouble did not start with the capes; it was already happening within the first week people came together. By the second week, when the cape activity occurred, at least one supervisor was already planning how to address race as it already mattered among the people in the organization. In this context the African American supervisor was responding to—not causing—racial trouble.

The addition of contextual information seemed to be triggered by my knowing something about what had happened, but not enough. Perhaps in my telling, I seemed to imply that the cape activity caused racial trouble, and that the African American supervisor was to blame for bad planning. Maybe I appeared to convey too much sympathy for those who were racially labeled. Or perhaps the teller thought I focused too much on the racial labeling and its consequences when the issue was the conditions that necessitated the planning of such an activity. Whatever it was that I seemed to misunderstand, I received instruction to pay attention to the conditions that produced the need to surface racial tensions, and thus, make them addressable.

**Telling #3, May 7**

Two days later I talked with another person in the organization, about our families, our goals, and, of course, our views on trouble in the organization. Since the person asked me to protect their confidentiality from people in the organization as well as from potential readers of my writing, I strive not to use any identifying characteristics, such as race, gender, or position in the organization in the story. I refer to the person as “the speaker.” The telling of the cape activity from another perspective—that of someone who found out the hard way the consequences of making racial labels unavoidable—well illustrates the interactional process of mis-education into race.

When I mentioned the capes, the speaker responded with some gravity, explaining that the facilitator was asked “to do some sort of race PD [professional development].” The facilitator did not give good instructions for the activity, the speaker claimed. She reportedly told the interns, “Write your first impressions based on what people look like, not after you have gotten to know them.” When people asked for clarity, the facilitator apparently said, “I’m going to leave that open.” So for the most part, the speaker told me, people wrote “surface things” such as “kind.”

The facilitator asked people to go to different corners of the room and to share the most surprising thing from their cape. Then they were to switch corners and share something that was disturbing with the new set of people there. The speaker reported being “honest” in participating in the activity, and expressed remorse that people were upset as a result of what was written.

Feeling protective of the speaker, I responded, “She [the facilitator] should have said this is a first impression, this is what you have to work with when you meet new people.” Perhaps responding to the implication that the facilitator was to blame, the speaker told me about writing an e-mail to the facilitator saying, “You can’t leave people feeling so upset, not knowing how to deal with it.” Apparently, this e-mail did not have much effect.

In this telling the speaker seemed to confess to writing at least some of the racial labels. (I do not know whether the speaker wrote all four of the racial labels I heard about, and I did not ask.) The speaker explained their intention to be honest, but not to be hurtful. Initially, I struggled over the question of whether the speaker really did not know that the labels would be hurtful, but asking this question did not take me very far. Instead I examined the telling of intentionality as an attempt to counter wrong assumptions of intentionality on the part of the anonymous writer(s). That is, I pay attention to the consequence of the speaker telling me what they meant to accomplish by writing those labels (without explicitly admitting that they had written the labels). I realized that I had assumed that the writer wanted to “call out” the recipients into behaving more responsibly as “people working on racism.” It had not occurred to me before this telling that the writer would not have used those labels had they known that people would be hurt so badly.

I want to point out that this was the first telling I participated in that seemed to challenge the appropriateness of making the racial labels public, of the activity, or of the ways in which the aftermath was handled. The people I talked with seemed to take for granted that the labels were already in use, or at least, not surprising. They did not seem to challenge the writing of the racial labels, nor did they seem critical of the activity or the facilitator for organizing trouble. If there was any disapproval, it appeared to be directed toward the recipients themselves for overreacting to what may have seemed like obvious, if unpleasant, truths. Based on other conversations, I would even hazard that some people thought of the extreme reaction to the labeling as evidence of the “whiteness” of the organization as a place where racial truth was suppressed and distorted to fit particular ends and sensibilities. In the previous tellings, people seemed to take for granted that the writer intended to humble the recipients of the labels, at least enough to startle them into self-examination. In contrast, the confessional telling of the capes focuses on the anonymous writer and the facilitator as making serious mistakes without repairing the damage.

The speaker found out that being “honest” about race brought distressing consequences. Eight months later, the speaker still seemed to struggle with guilt, confusion, and frustration at having catalyzed a damaging chain of events and not knowing what to do about it. People assumed a negative intentionality that the speaker did not mean to convey. Worse, since the speaker never publicly owned up to writing the labels, the recipients might be blaming the wrong people for writing the labels, exacerbating the damage. This does not mean, of course, that the speaker believed the labels themselves wrong or inaccurate. But some things, it seemed, should remain private. A month later, the speaker told me that one should “keep quiet” until figuring out how to air one’s concerns in a way that “gets things done.”

I found out how the telling of the capes implies intentionality. It is all too easy for the people in the activity, the researcher listening to the story, and the reader of the paper to assume that the anonymous writer meant to degrade the recipients, with mutually unsatisfactory consequences for subsequent interaction.

**Telling #4, May 25**

By late April, race conversations, including “community building” efforts, had become a forum to exchange recriminations and to vent criticisms of the organization. Even staff members had a “blowup” in a staff meeting, although race was not on the agenda. After prolonged argument, an African American staff member left in tears after declaring, “Black people grow up being told that you shouldn’t say certain things around White folks,” and “I keep saying the same things and not getting heard.” A few days later, the executive director put an end to race conversations in professional development meetings, asserting, “We’ve gotten too bogged down on ourselves, our relationships. We’re all here because of our vision in driving us to this work. The expectation is not to be best friends with everyone. We lose focus on
Meetings immediately quieted, and for the next six weeks people worked on “the Resource Guide,” a record of organizational know-how to be sold to other school reformers. While I was indignant that the executive director had shut down interns’ efforts to repair the damage between them, the interns themselves did not seem to raise a fuss, publicly or privately. Some expressed relief; others, resignation. Interestingly, though, the quality of my interviews improved. Perhaps with far fewer public outlets for talking about race, race conversations simply went underground into private spaces, such as interviews and conversations with me.

Another of these outlets was a “focus group” held at the end of May. A Latino staff member in charge of the “Equity Strategy” interviewed a team—the team known for racial conflict—to find out how they viewed the organizational approach to equity. In the course of the conversation, the Filipina intern invoked the capes. Apparently, the Latino staff member, who was hired after the cape activity, had not heard about it. He asked about it, but the cryptic answer did not seem to help. He pushed for clarification, but the Filipina intern did not seem to want to explain what happened. Eventually the African American intern stepped in to tell the story. After the telling, nobody pursued race as a topic for discussion.

Prior to this excerpt, taken from detailed notes, the staff member asked the group, “Has your understanding of the equity strategy changed over the year?” After the other interns gave answers, the staff member turned to the fourth intern, the Filipina.

Filipina Intern: I think one of the PDs [professional development meetings] that was really good in terms of equity was Christie’s on mentoring. It gave us a chance to practice. It shows how much equity PDs changed. We started with capes—

Staff Member: What was that?

Filipina Intern: We had to write our first impressions [of each other]. We went to, talking about situations in schools.

Staff Member: Was it useful, the capes?

Filipina Intern: I don’t know, I was just pulling it out as an example.

Staff Member: As far as something you would take to your schools?

Filipina Intern: Nooo...

African-American Intern: We had these capes of butcher paper on our backs. We were supposed to write our first impressions on them. Carol [the facilitator] meant it to be racial but we didn’t take it that way. People were like, [volume and pitch increasing] “What? You think I’m whitewashed? What? You think I talk white?”

Staff member: This was in the beginning of the year?

Filipina Intern: So we did activities like that where everybody was confused, where is this going. We tried to ask the leadership, what is this going to look like? But they were already thinking about what the equity strategy was. Then we moved into a community building thing. I don’t know if that was useful at all, but we didn’t touch on what was going on in schools. The thought partner [an organizational strategy for working with teachers] was more useful. And buy-in. But it was all surface level.

I will not do a full analysis here, but I want to point out that the capes were invoked to refer to—not necessarily to open up—a huge category of trouble. The Filipina intern seemed to assume that everyone already knew about the capes, or at least, would not ask her about them. The Latino staff member apparently did not know about the capes and pushed to find out, breaching social order a la Garfinkel (1963, 1967) and leading to various kinds of discomfiting talk approaching race, skirting around race, touching on race briefly, and eventually, backing away. The conversation began with the equity strategy and moved into professional development meetings, allowing for a brief mention of race in telling the story. Nobody took up the story, and race became bracketed off in talk about professional development activities and the equity strategy—right back to where the talk had started.

This opens the question of when the telling of racial trouble can occur. When tensions still run high, talking about past incidents can set off trouble. Of course, the story of the capes need not be told among people who were present at the scene, or when people know their interlocutors already know what happened. That the Latino staff member did not know the story provided an occasion for telling it. But the difficulty of telling the story, particularly in its context of a discussion on what worked and didn’t work in addressing how race matters, points to the ongoing trouble between participants. The story went undeveloped as an example of something that didn’t work racially among a group of people in which race continues to be an issue.

Given what we know about American racism it would be tempting to say that they avoided talking about race, or that the facilitator shirked his responsibilities in finding out about race and dealing with it. But I do not have the evidence to say these things. What I can say is that the telling itself was instructive as a lesson on negotiating the ambiguities of racialized interaction. In telling and not telling the story, people worked within the constraints of doing “talk about what worked” while dealing with ongoing tensions in the group. People got into trouble and got back out without igniting another explosion.

Telling #5, June 8

After the first few tellings, I knew to ask people directly about the cape activity. A few weeks later, near the end of the school year, I collected an account from a White participant, specifically, the one who had been labeled “white girl.”

“I was probably one of the thick-headed people who didn’t get it,” she told me with a small laugh. “It was hard to do, with people you had been hanging out with for one and a half years.” Having worked together for just over a year, ten of the eighteen interns had already formed strong friendships. She continued, “Or trying to think with Sandra, what was my first impression?” Sandra, a first-year Latina intern, was new to the organization at the time. “I wrote things like friendly, talks a lot.”
I saw her body stiffen as she described taking off her cape and seeing “white girl” written across it, and seeing “really white” on her friend’s cape. Then, a White intern who was respected as a leader among many of the second-year interns took charge of the situation. It seems that he asked the White interns to share their reactions with one another in front of the interns of color. As the storyteller mentioned the take-charge intern’s name, the muscles in her face and body relaxed, and her voice dropped. “Robert says,” and here she paused with a small smile, “in Robert-style, as he does, we’re sitting in a circle, ‘How does that make you feel?’ Then she frowned again. “In that conversation, it almost takes some sort of negative thing. We are all in this organization that serves ELLs [English Language Learners]. Those are communities we serve. There’s a negative vibe.”

Near the end of the school year, as people were preparing to leave the organization, I found that there was still more to the story. Trouble had immediately been addressed, at least for White interns, when they had a chance to respond and process what had happened. On the one hand, it worked to some degree; nine months later, the storyteller smiled and relaxed when she recalled the White intern asking them to share their feelings. On the other hand, it didn’t work at all. Nine months later, thinking of the capes made her quite upset. She seemed to suggest with her assertion, “We are all in this organization that serves ELLs,” that White people in the organization should not be challenged racially given their commitment to serving non-White children. (I specify White people, since she did not mention that others had been labeled as “whitewashed” and “talks white.”) Of course, not everyone agreed that working for the organization was enough to protect White people from racial challenge.

With the fifth telling I found out that there had been an effort to explore and share the responses of White interns to what had happened. I did not hear any mention of a discussion for people of color to talk about the labels “whitewashed” and “talks white,” or to discuss the frustration of seeing the conversation shut down as soon as people expressed distress. Nor did I hear of any successful communication between those surprised by the labels and those who were not. Whatever discussion took place immediately after the cape activity seemed only to address the distress “caused” by what was written on the capes—not the tensions already at work, nor even the reactions to the distress. Perhaps more importantly, neither did subsequent conversations. Months later, people continued to invoke the cape activity in complaining about race.

CONCLUSION

The story of the capes could have been told differently, as an amusing anecdote, or as the beginning of a larger narrative on racial progress in the organization. A comment written on an evaluation form from the day of the cape activity also hints at the possibilities: “I liked that more ‘white’ voices were heard today.” Perhaps people could have learned to listen across difference, as proponents of race conversations may claim. Perhaps this would have been a paper about how people figured out, after a rocky start, how to move through difficult moments in race talk.

Instead, people told the capes to illustrate and explain ongoing racial trouble. The African American intern seemed to tell the story to show the difficulty of getting people—White people and people of color—to engage deeply with race. People shut down after being confronted and did not seem to recover. That the intern’s teammates went to a high-ranking White leader to complain about her and her African American supervisor does not seem surprising in the context of the capes. The team leader—the person ostensibly responsible for trying to work out conflicts before going to higher-ups—was the person labeled as “white girl” in the cape activity. She, like other White participants, did not seem to want to talk to me about the capes, perhaps because it was still too painful. The “negative vibe” had never dissipated.

The activity made concretely visible what cannot be said about race, how it cannot be said, and the consequences of saying it. Racial trouble was told through anonymous and ambiguous messages literally written behind people’s backs. People could not tell one another in face-to-face interaction that they came across as white, whitewashed, or racially aggressive and what this meant to them. People could not explicitly say how and when race was made to matter in their interactions with one another. Saying the unsayable traumatized the recipients without addressing the racial tensions already at work, and had heavy consequences for subsequent interaction. Months later, people continued to talk about the capes aggrievedly, regretfully, even remorsefully.

That people continued to complain about the capes months later—and only in private conversation—reflects much more than what happened in the scene. It also suggests the continuation of their mis-education into race. People did not simply talk about the capes as the problem. They talked about the capes as an example of underlying and ongoing problems: how race is handled in organizational life, and how to negotiate race in interaction with one another. They had to figure out what can and cannot be said publicly, how, and when; how to respond to trouble, including recrimination, insinuation, and justification (whether “real” or “imagined”); and how to get out of trouble without making things worse. Their (mis-) education brought them back to where they started: restricting race talk to private spaces.

Notes

1 I am using transformation in the interactional sense, as used by other authors in this issue, to refer to ways people try to change one another, and resist those efforts. While this can sometimes lead to radical social change such as the empowerment of disenfranchised people, the eradication of social injustices, and the resolution of complex social conflict, it often does not. “Transformation,” as I will show, can result in consequences that appear negative, positive, or both.

2 The reader may notice that at times I capitalize the word “White” and at times I do not. Given that the analytical dilemma of when to capitalize the term the has not been adequately addressed, I have developed my own system. The federal racial category of “White” serves an “empty” category, as a descriptive term that does not carry the negative meanings implied in the pejorative terms “really white” and “whitewashed.” When I identify specific individuals as “White” in relation to others as “people of color” or “African American,” I capitalize the word. When I refer to practices of identification, such as labeling someone as a “white girl,” I do not capitalize the term. However, the lines between pejorative and descriptive, racial identity and practices of racial identification are not always clear.

3 People in the organization expressed multiple concerns about the narrow definition of the achievement gap: the problematic use of standard tested scores to measure educational achievement and improvement; the focus on students’ “deficits”; the failure to consider the incredible diversity within the categories of “Latino,” “people of color,” and “Asian American”; and the categorical exclusion of all Asian American and Pacific Islander students from organizational concern, particularly children of refugees from Southeast Asia.
4 I do not mean to imply that I occupied a “neutral” position, if such a position could exist in such a highly charged setting. Certainly some people in the organization saw me as taking sides in various instances of “racial” conflict, but without consistently siding with either “White people” or “people of color.” If pressed, I would say that I was “ambiguously raced,” and I can state with confidence that nearly everyone in the organization continually perceived me as consorting with the “wrong people,” since each person I talked with, from one perspective or another, was “wrong.”


6 I am not certain who was labeled as “talks white.” Based on people’s descriptions of this particular staff member as unable to code-switch, that is, to adjust his speech to different social situations, I understood that he was regarded as “talking white.”

References


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