Outside the Circle? The Relational Implications for White Women Working Against Racism

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About the Authors
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Abstract
What leads White women to speak up against racism, an action which threatens their own racial privilege? What are the relational implications of doing so? Based on interviews with eight White women educators who are have assumed positions of leadership in their school districts as part of an anti-racist initiative, this paper explores the relational origins of their activism and its implications for their own relational growth and development.

Several years ago we read Outside the Magic Circle (Barnard, 1985), the autobiography of Virginia Foster Durr, a Southern White woman, born in 1905, who spent most of her adult life working for social justice in the South. She described her early life as one of great privilege and of pervasive racism, a world of Black servants and assumed White superiority. She was raised to be a “Southern belle.” But when as an adult she began speaking up about racism, she quickly found that she had stepped “outside the magic circle.” Despite many social and economic pressures to step back into the circle of privilege, she and her husband, Clifford Durr, continued their civil rights work throughout their lives.

What leads people like Virginia Foster Durr and others to step outside the circle? What are the relational implications of doing so? How do they maintain their stance on the margins of society with those who are oppressed? As has been discussed elsewhere (Tatum, 1994), the stories of White women and men who have chosen to actively interrupt racism and stand in solidarity with oppressed people are not well known. Yet, Beverly, as an anti-racist educator teaching students about the psychology of racism, has found that her students, most of whom are White women, are desperately in need of examples.

As they become aware of the still pervasive racism in our society, they are often moved to act against it. They struggle with their own fears about stepping outside the circle of White privilege and search for role models who might show them how it is done. When Beverly invites a White activist to speak to her class about her own personal journey toward an awareness of racism and her development as a White ally, the questions students most often ask clearly reflect relational concerns. “Did you lose friends when you started to speak up?” “How do you
deal with your relatives when they make racist remarks?” “My boyfriend is so prejudiced! What can I do?” Their anxiety about the potential for social isolation is apparent. The students seem to feel that they are standing on the edge of the wilderness, and there is great fear about being out there alone. The voices of those who are already out there blazing the trail need amplification.

It is clear that these students need to have the lives of White people who are working against racism made more visible, and the relational implications of that work need to be examined. It is this examination that is the focus of this paper.

Setting the context

The eight White women whose lives we will be discussing have several things in common. They are all experienced public school educators, ranging in age from 37 to 55. The predominantly White suburban districts they represent are all located in the greater Boston area. These school districts are all participating in the METCO program, a voluntary desegregation program which brings Boston students of color, most of whom are African-American, to their schools. All of the women were participants in a pilot professional development course sponsored by their school districts which focused on issues of race and racism in schools.

Following the completion of the 54-hour course, in the spring of 1994, all course participants were offered the opportunity to receive additional training and support to assume a leadership role in their districts, working with other faculty and staff as anti-racist peer educators. These eight White women, along with two women of color and two White men, volunteered to become “district trainers.”

After a four-day training workshop which took place in the summer of 1994, the district trainers planned and implemented various kinds of anti-racist activities (mini-courses, study groups, parent workshops) in their districts during the 1994-95 school year. They also had the opportunity to meet bi-monthly after school to talk with each other about what they were doing, sharing ideas and problem-solving as necessary.

During this time, Beverly was one of the instructors for the professional development course and the four-day training workshop. She also facilitated the district trainer support group meetings. During those meetings, she was often struck by how often the White trainers talked about feeling “out on a limb” with their colleagues. As they became more identified with an anti-racist perspective, some colleagues sought them out for advice about racial issues, but others seemed to now view them with some suspicion. These White women seemed to be describing the kind of social pressure identified by Helms (1990) as common when White racial awareness increases and anti-racist action is initiated.¹

We became increasingly interested in knowing more about how their relationships with family, friends and colleagues were being impacted by their anti-racist work. We collaborated to develop an interview guide for use with the White district trainers. Elizabeth, then a graduate student in psychology and education, conducted the individual interviews, and we have been working together to analyze the data in terms of the relational themes. Data from the interviews with the eight White women will be presented here. We will first provide a description of some of their experiences and then discuss the implications of those experiences for relational theory. All names used to refer to the participants are pseudonyms.

Relational roots of an anti-racist identity

The personal histories of the eight women are varied. Most grew up in predominantly White suburban or rural communities, but two were raised in racially-mixed urban settings. While one woman described her family as “very conservative” and two others related clear examples of parental racism, the five remaining women described having at least one liberal parent who modeled openness to other cultures and respect for racial differences. In some cases, religious messages about equality, fairness, and compassion for others were also important early influences. Yet for all, their limited contact with people of color contributed to a very naïve understanding of racial issues until adulthood.

It was in their college years or later that they had educational and/or social experiences which heightened their awareness. For example, Anna said:

I went to a [weekend] workshop on racism when I was 20, in college. And that had a very powerful effect . . . I really remember so much about that, even now I could quote some things that were said there . . . I really realized in a big way that we had to make up