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# Consciousness Raising and Reality Construction Within Oppressed Groups: Bridging the Gap Between Feminist Theory and Critical Race Theory

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## Abstract

Human beings' understanding of the world around them, and how they interpret events that occur within that world, are expressions of their culture, their worldview (of reality). Many authors have written about reality as a social construction, some times through contracts (in a state, for example, the Racial Contract). I propose that reality can be (and often is) constructed through culture (within a group). The deconstruction of the officially (state sanctioned) accepted reality, by members of oppressed groups, is the first step in gathering the tools to empower themselves. This is a process of consciously recognizing the unconscious behavior of the privileged group/class. The reconstruction of a more accurate account of reality and the ability of individuals to identify themselves as a group is essential to affirming the reality of their experience as truth. Some cultures (for example indigenous peoples of the Western Hemisphere) have existed before the state that was constructed. In such cases, rather than reconstructing and creating, the task at hand is often remembering and affirming the validity of the (indigenous pre-conquest) culture. The psychological research into the social construction of stereotypes, and prejudice, confirms that much of these thoughts originate on an unconscious (and as a result unexamined) level of thinking. The consciousness raising techniques can begin to bring to the conscious level many of the quick (snap) decisions that rest beneath and behind prejudice and stereotypical thinking. Drawing on the work of MacKinnon, Mills, Foucault, and Banaji to bridge the gap between feminist theory and critical race theory by recognizing overlapping layers of oppression. In particular the oppression within oppressed groups, by those with limited degrees of 'micro-power' oppressing others within oppressed groups with no power at all. As a Native/Chicano/Irish person growing up in various different rural and urban areas throughout America, I integrate my personal experience into the philosophical theories.

Human beings' understanding of the world around them, and how they interpret events that occur within that world, are expressions of their culture, their worldview (of reality). Many authors<sup>1</sup> have written about reality as a social construction, some times through contracts (in a state, for example, the Racial Contract). I propose that reality can be (and often is) constructed through culture (within a group). The deconstruction of the officially (state sanctioned) accepted reality, by members of oppressed groups, is the first step in gathering the tools to empower themselves. This is a process of consciously recognizing the unconscious behavior of the privileged group/class. The reconstruction of a more accurate account of reality and the ability of individuals to

identify themselves as a group is essential to affirming the reality of their experience as truth. Some cultures (for example indigenous peoples of the Western Hemisphere) have existed before the state that was constructed. In such cases, rather than reconstructing and creating, the task at hand is often remembering and affirming the validity of the (indigenous pre-conquest) culture. The psychological research<sup>2</sup> into the social construction of stereotypes, and prejudice, confirms that much of these thoughts originate on an unconscious (and as a result unexamined) level of thinking. The consciousness raising techniques can begin to bring to the conscious level many of the quick (snap) decisions that rest beneath and behind prejudice and stereotypical thinking.

Feminist theory and critical race theory have many similarities. One in particular is the ability to identify individuals as belonging to a group that shares similar experiences and views of the world. The major conflict between the two (camps of theorists, Feminist vs. Critical Race) is a fundamental disregard of overlapping layers of oppression (by many authors, theorists, and activists in all groups). That is, to focus on only one set of hierarchies at a time, rather than to accept various different groups' ability to oppress each other, even within their own group (in Foucaultian terms, those with no micro-power). For example there are a variety of different hierarchies that exist in which some non-white males receive male privilege and some white females receive white privilege. This can be applied across economic class lines, sexual preference, hair/eye color, etc. Any difference that goes to separate human beings from one another. The very acceptance of the individual (Cartesian) subject, I, as an artificial separation of an individual from their own people can become a motivation to oppress the 'other.' This artificial division, created by the acceptance of the one of the foundations of Western Civilization, can potentially become a path to oppression.

Among and within groups another division exists, that is purely aesthetic, among non-white people (often of a multi-racial background) whom are able to 'pass' as white and often do, (consciously, or unconsciously) accepting white privilege. This has been called cultural schizophrenia. Yet and still another division exists among non-white people, that is the attempt to assimilate to the (dominant culture) white world in order to be accepted into the white world (often through marriage and/or economic class). These people are often termed a 'sell-out' by their own people, and often rejected by whites on purely aesthetic grounds (for example in Georgia, the Ridge Family of the Cherokee Nation in the 1800's). These different responses to racism create hierarchical divisions within non-white communities. These divisions are used to divide, splinter apart, and create negative feelings within, and between, various oppressed groups. This classic divide and conquer technique prevents different groups from uniting against oppression. Often times, when granted a small degree of privilege and/or power, the oppressed (on the micro-level of an individual subject, I) turn around and oppress others outside of, and within, their own group. This oppressive use of power creates a

short-term, and hollow, form of self-esteem. A cycle of oppression is created and expressed as a subculture within a historically oppressed group that works to continually oppress itself (the individual subject, I, against the communal subject, us) through micro-power the I becomes the oppressor of us (the oppressed). These oppressive acts work to validate the individual subject's (the oppressor's) experience of being oppressed. This type of oppression is often manifested as the adults in (micro)power oppressing the young(er) people within their own group. Many of the rationalizations used in justifying this type of behavior<sup>3</sup> are: 'the same thing (being oppressed) happened to me when I was at that age, and I turned out okay, it made me a stronger person,' etc. These have become cliché from overuse. These rationalizations may not even be conscious thoughts, and as a result not thoughts subject to examination.

The 'consciousness raising' that MacKinnon (and Rowbothom) write about is one path to empowering, or healing the internal damage of the oppressed group's self-esteem. This can be one path to ending the oppression of others by those who are themselves victims of oppression. The act of recognizing and naming the oppressor (or oppressive actions), even within our own behavior (or deeper still within our culture) is a path to emancipating ourselves. Cornel Pewewardy, a professor at PSU in Native American Studies, once told me, "the hurt hurt, and the healed heal." This means that in order not to continue to hurt each other, we must heal ourselves and then heal each other. Oppressed groups can never unite against oppression if we keep oppressing each other, even through inaction, or complicity, in the face of oppressive acts against another group, or even within our own (for example, people during 9-11-2001)<sup>4</sup>. This is to acknowledge our own micro-power (even through complicit inaction) and resist oppression wherever it shows itself.

In Catherine MacKinnon's book, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, she lays out a theory of (or process towards) empowerment of oppressed people, this could be applied to a number of different groups. "The key to feminist[and/or critical race] theory consists in its way of knowing. Consciousness raising is that way. '[An] oppressed group must at once shatter the self-reflecting world which encircles it and, at the same time, project its own image onto history. In order to discover its own identity as distinct from that of the oppressor, it has to become visible to itself. All revolutionary movements create their own way of seeing.'" (MacKinnon pg. 84/ Rowbotham, pg. 27)<sup>5</sup> The attempt to separate the oppressed group from the oppressor is where MacKinnon's feminist theory falters, as white feminists must recognize their own privilege and ability to oppress others in the overlapping zones of prescribed hierarchy (for example people of color). The experience of an oppressed people works to invalidate the culture of white (male) supremacy. This culture is so widespread as to have become a culture all to itself that MacKinnon calls the socially constructed reality<sup>6</sup> (of the oppressor). At the same time the validation of personal experience creates

another reality, a form of knowledge in French termed, 'savoir'.<sup>7</sup> Experience is a distinct way of knowing truth (and/or reality).<sup>8</sup> When put together, a group of individuals who share similar experiences of being oppressed begin to relate their personal story, or individual experience with the group, the group begins to create a collective reality, or regime of truth, rooted in common experience. This process of consciousness raising could be seen as experiments in the science of reality construction, reflecting the various cultures, or 'ways of knowing' that exist. This group, or collective, affirmation of personal experience as authentic articles of truth works to empower the community with a knowledge of (it)self, or ourself. This process of change works to create self-knowledge, or, knowledge of self, which in turn begins to create self-esteem as the individual's experience is reflected in each member of the group, and a collective history (of the experiences of oppression) is at the same time created and affirmed. MacKinnon explains, "The particularities become facets of the collective understanding within which differences constitute rather than undermine collectivity." (MacKinnon, pg. 86) Once the experience is affirmed, it can be analyzed and the various different actions can be dissected and power/privilege relationships analyzed. These power/privilege relationships must be consciously recognized no matter how deep within the unconscious they occur. This healing must then work to create more healing, to the point it becomes a counter-culture against the culture of oppression.

Racism, and sexism, has undergone a metamorphosis through these experiments in reality construction. The introduction to Foucault's work, *Power* (ed. Faubion), maintains that, "power 'comes from below,' that is that global and hierarchical structures of domination within a society depend on and operate through more local, low-level, 'capillary' circuits of power relationship." (pp. xxiv-xxv) The white male power structure depends on the internalization of these hierarchies on the micro-level, that is within ourselves, which could be called micro-power. This shows how, even on an unconscious level, the various different hierarchies (race, gender, etc.) are maintained in a constantly changing environment. These constant changes occur in order to create plausible deniability in those who wield 'micro-power'. The excuse (if any is given at all) is often, 'I didn't know' or 'I didn't mean it like that,' to deny the racist/sexist (intent) of a given action. Many times people get very angry, inexplicably hurt feelings, and/or confused, when confronted with their (even complicit) action (or inaction) of oppression. White male supremacy denies the reality of the experience of all non-white (and non-male) people, as documented by Mills. This is denial of the experience of discrimination, on an epistemological level, as Mills outlines in *The Racial Contract*:

"[O]fficially sanctioned reality is divergent from actual reality. So here, it could be said, one has an agreement to misinterpret the world. One has to learn to see the world wrongly, but with the assurance that this set of mistaken perceptions

will be validated by white epistemic authority... Thus in effect, on matters related to race, the Racial Contract prescribes for its signatories an inverted epistemology, an epistemology of ignorance, a particular pattern of localized and global cognitive dysfunctions (which are psychologically and socially functional), producing the ironic outcome that whites will in general be unable to understand the world that they themselves have made.”

This passage outlines how and why the perpetrators of racist and sexist acts feel attacked when confronted with the (oppressive) reality of their actions. They (the perpetrators) have been trained to ‘see the world wrongly.’ The history of white male supremacy is so entrenched in the psyche of people all over the world that the 40 years of legislation that has attempted to bring about equality (within the U.S.) has only changed the overtly racist actions. In order to actualize change within our community as a whole, we must first recognize the oppressive actions that we ourselves perpetrate. These oppressive actions may be in response to white supremacy, in viewing all white people as bad (or evil), or as sexist acts against women within our own group. As human beings we must work to abandon the individual subject, I, and create a communal subject, us, in order to recognize our oppressive acts and the experiences of being oppressed as a group and create a communal subjectivity.

Foucault spoke about the subject and the object of science working together in the creation of multiple truths. “Might not a science be analyzed or conceived of basically as an experience, that is, as a relationship in which the subject is modified by that experience? Scientific practice, in other words, would function both as the ideal object and subject of knowledge. And might not the historical root of a science lie in that reciprocal genesis of the subject and the object of knowledge? What effect of truth is produced that way? This would imply that there isn’t one truth.” (*Power*, pg. 254) The communal subject, us, must consciously be modified by the practice of the science of reality construction. That is the deconstruction of the socially constructed reality (the object) and reconstruction of reality by the communal us (subject) in order to create a regime of truth that reflects a raised consciousness. This concept of multiple truths must be incorporated into the communal subject’s experience.

We must all recognize within ourselves the oppressed and the oppressor in order to realize the multiple truths of our collective experiences. There have been a few different attempts to remedy the inequalities and oppression of white supremacy (blinding, consciousness raising, and affirmative action)<sup>9</sup>. The white male has attempted to portray himself as a victim of affirmative action; this is a positive step towards a communal subjective understanding of oppression. Whether or not the white male is actually oppressed by affirmative action is irrelevant, the fact that he feels oppressed is the first step in raising his consciousness to what it is like to actually be oppressed. Just as it is eye opening for a member of an unprivileged group to all of a

sudden be on the receiving end of privilege. For example, I myself am a person of color, Native American, Chicano, and Irish. I have grown up in America and know what it feels like to be on the wrong end of oppression way too well. When traveling to other, third (and fourth) world countries I have been treated as 'American' and given privilege as a tourist with money to spend, and I have also been looked at as (equal to) a white man. The first time this happened to me was in St. Vincent (an island in the eastern Caribbean), I was shocked, and (unconsciously) denied my privilege, by the simple fact that I was waiting my turn in line. My friend explained to me that no one would get served until I (for the first time being conscious of being views as), a white man, got served first. He told me, "You know you don't get this [treatment, privilege, power] at home, might as well enjoy it [while you have the opportunity]!" (inserting my understanding at the time). I was not sure how to handle this, I was hungry and so was my friend, so I accepted my privilege and ordered my food first. After years of reflection this experience has opened my eyes as to how hard it is to deny (or often times to even recognize) privilege. There are times and places where denying privilege is not even an option.

Day to day life experience, as a member of a culturally subordinate (oppressed) group, is akin to performing scientific experiments each day. These experiments work to test the truth of the socially constructed reality of the dominant culture (oppressor). The way of knowing reality that comes from direct experience is a path to (a) truth. Collective experience can create change within the members of the group. This change can be a pathway to ending oppression within the group that undergoes the change.

I grew up in Warm Springs (Reservation), Oregon, when I was 3-8 years old, 1980-85. An environment that is 95% Native all the time creates different power relationships, the white people were not (socially) privileged at all, having even less privilege than the people living there. Just off the Reservation (for example the nearest town 20-30 miles away, Madras, Oregon), I encountered extremely blatant racist white people. Pendleton, Oregon also had a large amount (even more than Madras, from 1985-86) of extremely blatant racist white people as well. The entire range of the society within these predominately white communities, from top to bottom, it seemed all were infected with racism, my teachers, the cops, the parents of my friends, perhaps the only place I felt half-way accepted, at that point in time, was the cub scouts, this may be because my inherited knot tying abilities granted me a somewhat privileged position in my troop. American society has changed somewhat in the past 20 years, although the change is often only on the surface that is displayed. The systemic process of dehumanization that is perpetrated on people as the progress in age from childhood to entering the work force (in the teenage years) works to destroy the self-esteem (and often savoir, know-how) to actualize goals in many facets of adult life. As a group of people loses their self-worth and the (almost cancer-like) infestation of cynical and apathetic attitudes infects the community, security is one of the first casualties. A community can become

more dangerous and the forms of oppression, more blatant and extreme, are accepted as a fact of life that is hopelessly unchangeable.

Bob Marley sang, “It takes a revolution to make a solution” in the song aptly titled “Revolution.” This revolution must take place in the consciousness of human beings on the planet earth with the realization of the communal subject, us, on a global scale; we, the people of earth. This is the solution to the problem posed by the white (male) supremest hierarchy within the social construction of reality. The destruction of the socially constructed reality that reinforces the white (male) supremest power structure. All human beings must relate our various truths that have been established through our experience, in order to create the change within us all as human beings. The individual subject (I) must be abandoned and the communal subject (us), that includes all human beings, must undergo this trans-formative experience in order for us all to begin to dismantle the oppression that we submit ourselves to and perpetrate on each other.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>MacKinnon, Mills, and many others

<sup>2</sup>Banaji & Greenwald, 1995

<sup>3</sup>(by the individual subject, I, the oppressor)

<sup>4</sup>After 9-11-2001 Many people perceived to be Muslim or Middle Eastern were victims



of hate crimes.

<sup>5</sup>In this passage MacKinnon quotes another author, Sheila Rowbothom's book, *Woman's Consciousness, Man's World*. The separation of oneself from the oppressor must not be a static line.

<sup>6</sup>Mills' *The Racial Contract* calls this "officially sanctioned reality", also an "inverted epistemology," or "epistemological ignorance" (see quote below).

<sup>7</sup>Foucault refers to the French word, "savoir," a term for knowledge with connotations of "know-how" for this middle sort of knowledges, which may fall short of rigorous scientificity but command some degree of ratification within a social group and confer some recognized instrumental benefit." (pp. xviii-xix).

<sup>8</sup>"Truth, Foucault says, is 'a thing of this world' meaning that truth exists... through actual experiences." (pp. xviii)

<sup>9</sup>Banaji and Greenwald stated these as "strategies for avoiding unintended discrimination" (p. 19).