

**Forum: Reflections on White Racial  
Identity in the ABE Classroom**

*(Part 2 of 4)*

# “Race”ing White Instructors: Beyond the Black-White Binary

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With the rise of overt racism, xenophobia, nationalism, homophobia, transphobia, and religious discrimination accompanied by attacks against women’s rights in the United States and other parts of the globe, Brookfield’s “Why White Instructors Should Explore their White Racial Identity” is a needed contribution to ABE. He shows how white normativity and the ensuing universalizing of the white experience promotes and sustains white supremacy, and thereby, structural racism. Brookfield uses Yancy’s (2018) argument to show how whites are complicit with structural racism by stating that “it’s a fact that whiteness as an identity is connected to power, particularly to the way that a learned blindness to racial inequality helps maintain a system that exhibits structural exclusion and normalizes brutality.” Brookfield’s analysis using race and structural racism clearly shows how whites as a group benefit from white supremacy by being “embedded in a pre-existing social matrix of white power” and how that confers privileges on the group as a whole. This, in turn, Brookfield contends has led to the idea of whiteness, the white experience being the norm, and the belief that white is not a racial identity. He argues that whites are raced and that race is a white problem, not just a problem for people of color, thus calling on white instructors to reflect on their racial identity

to be better teachers and help students learn. With this in mind, I found Brookfield’s analysis and call for action a persuasive intervention; however, I would like to problematize and broaden his decontextualized, essentializing, and binary theorization and stated practices of whiteness by suggesting that we go beyond a binary conception of race by adding an intersectional analysis (Berger & Guidroz, 2009; Crenshaw, 1990) that includes race, social class, gender, nationality, and citizenship. Otherwise, we as ABE researchers and practitioners, will once again default to centering whiteness and the white experience while pushing all other racial identities and experiences to the margins and reducing racial relations and racism to the “white-and” binary paradigm of race. As Brookfield acknowledges in his paper, he speaks from a place of white male privilege, and based on this privilege and his experiences, there is both an essentializing of race and whiteness and binary perception of race, both of which stem from a particular cultural-historical perspective.

I want to start by situating myself and providing readers context about my perspective. First, I am an adult educator with a multiplicity of identities: Indian woman, Malaysian, postcolonial feminist, professor, American, Christian, etc. Second, I racially identify as South Asian American. “As a South Asian American, I am not white, but

neither am I historically and culturally black” (Gnanadass, 2016, p. 2), so I do not see myself in the black-white binary paradigm of race. Finally, this critique is crafted from a U.S.-centric perspective on race.

Keeping this in mind, I critique Brookfield’s conceptualization by going beyond his call for reflection on whiteness. Brookfield highlights the hegemony of the white experience as the norm and the power and privilege that this entails. This unquestioned normativity of the white experience which he defines as “the idea that the norms and standards by which we judge what is acceptable and normal in the world are colored white,” privileges white ways of knowing and teaching in the classroom. This translates to ABE as the privileging and conceptualization of literacy as a decontextualized set of portable skills (St. Clair & Belzer, 2010), in other words, school literacy, and the dismissal of other literacies and ways of knowing. When instructors subscribe to this autonomous perspective of literacy (Street, 1984a, 2006), they do not view literacy as embedded in the socio-cultural context of people’s lives. Therefore, literacy instruction is not contextualized or individualized so that learners can interact with text and make meaning of it based on their social context and social interactions (St. Clair & Belzer, 2010; Street, 1984b). According to the Division of Adult Education and Literacy, 1.5 million learners are enrolled in publicly funded ABE programs, the majority, 74%, are not white (U.S. Department of Education, 2018, p. 3). Thus, the white standard and white ways of knowing and meaning making will be an anomaly, not a norm for this majority. As such, Brookfield’s call for white instructors to see themselves as raced and pushing back on the idea of white not being a race is needed.

The byproduct of white normativity is the belief

that white is not a racial identity and that race is only applicable to people of color. Or as Brookfield points out, “Race is always seen as something that others have, and those ‘others’ typically have black, brown, red and yellow skin.” This belief by white instructors can cause harm to ABE students who are predominantly people of color (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). In program year 2015-2016, 44% of adult learners identified as Hispanic or Latino, 20% as Black or African American, 9% as Asian and 1% as American Indian or Alaska Native (U.S. Department of Education, 2018, p. 3). So if white instructors believe that only non-whites have a race and they are the standard who are unnamed and raceless, whether intentionally or unintentionally, there is a danger in them seeing their students not as individuals who have particular goals and needs, but solely as “others” belonging to other racial groups. This could lead to stereotyping, ascribing qualities to learners based on their appearance, and treating them as objects who are viewed as “other” or different. Thus Brookfield’s position that white is a racial identity and whites have a race as well is a necessary intervention. Recognition and acceptance by white instructors that they too have a racial identity, albeit one with perceived power, privilege, and benefits that is a product of history and culture in white-supremacist-capitalist-patriarchy (hooks, 2014), which shapes their social interactions, including their teaching and relationships with students, is a crucial first step in acknowledging and valuing their multiracial students.

However, in the multiracial landscape of ABE, I suggest it would be helpful to extend and complicate Brookfield’s sole focus on the white racial identity and whiteness, which can be perceived as essentialist and reductionist to an intersectional analysis that minimally takes into

account race, social class, gender, nationality, and citizenship status. Brookfield by focusing solely on race and basing his analysis on his experience as a privileged white male, is assuming that all whites have or share his experience. Therefore, they need to do what *he* is trying to do to confront accrued privileges and benefits from white supremacist structures. Furthermore, this conceptualization of whiteness and the white experience implies that white is a homogeneous category. As we know, whiteness is complicated and raises the question of who is white or who is seen as white? Is whiteness defined by skin color only? And who gets to define this category of whiteness? Is white an identity or an identification? In writing this response, I am not trying to deny and minimize the existence of white privilege. I acknowledge that whiteness is imbued with power and privilege, but I also want to emphasize that white experience is not a universal or generalized experience. With this in mind, white ABE instructors are not *just* white. In other words, they are not solely constituted by race. They are gendered, classed, and have a multiplicity of identities that go beyond race. To illustrate, a white instructor could be a cisgender woman, mother, adult educator, working class, first generation college graduate, a lesbian, an immigrant, and so forth, and identifying her as just white or asking her to identify herself as white, might be doing symbolic violence to her idea of self. Furthermore, in ESL classrooms, nationality and citizenship status play an important role. We have many instances in which ESL students might “look” white and not identify as such or might not appear as white in the United States conceptualization and every day deployment of race but might identify themselves as white, and instructors need to acknowledge their identification, culture and history in meeting student needs and goals and curriculum development.

I appreciate Brookfield’s acknowledged positionality as a white male and his transparency that he is writing from his positionality with its partial perspective (Haraway, 1988). However, from his vantage point as a white male, his conceptualization of race relations is binary at times, an assumption that race relations are only between white and black people or between white and people of color, which erases other identities and racisms. This is much like the black-white paradigm of race (Perea, 1998; Westmoreland, 2013) in which there are primarily two groups in the United States, black and white. Hence, race relations are conceived as the relationship between these two groups, and racism is reduced to anti-black racism which results in the obscuring of all other racisms. Before I proceed, I want to situate this discussion in the racist context of the United States with its history of genocide, slavery, segregation, incarceration, and exclusionary immigration laws and recognize that the pain and suffering of that history still lives in the present. Thus, the focus on anti-black racism is important and relevant to this discussion on white instructors, but we need to make sure that this does not make invisible the other racial groups or force all other racial groups to identify themselves in these binary categories. In ESL and other ABE classrooms, there is a diversity of nationalities, races, ethnicities, and social classes. Therefore, viewing these learners through a black-white binary strips them of their agency by naming them, imposing particular cultural-historical identities on them, robbing them of their rich national and cultural histories, and dismissing racisms against them in order to make them fit into our U.S.-centric perspectives on race.

We are all constituted by a multiplicity of identities; we are not one or the other; we are all “and” identities. Although some identities might

be more salient at times, we are not just one identity all the time. As Crenshaw (1990) argues, a black woman is not just black or just a woman, she is both, an intersectional identity constituted by race and gender. Likewise, white instructors are not just white instructors, they are constituted

by multiple, intersecting identities. This not an argument to minimize white supremacy or its effects, but to complicate the conceptualization of race presented in Brookfield's paper with an intersectional approach in white-supremacist-capitalist-patriarchy (hooks, 2014).

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