White Families & White Privilege: Intersectionality, Critical Self-Reflexivity, and Shifting the Center

Bethany L. Letiecq, PhD
Human Development & Family Science
George Mason University
Office: 703-993-5076
Email: bletiecq@gmu.edu
Shifting the Center

- Shifting the center is critical to studying R/C/G in ways that transform existing social arrangements.
- It means including voices that have been unheard or silenced because those voices were from the non-dominant group or were marginalized in our social world.
- Knowledge and understanding of our society has been constructed by those in power...because they have had the most access to systems of education and communication.
- Our justice-based work includes reconstructing what we know to include those perspectives and lived experiences that have not been heard or understood or have been silenced and marginalized...
Shifting the Center

- Goal: Reconstructing knowledge
- Goal: Engage the self in a reflexive process of transformation.
- Goal: Seek to change self/systems of power/privilege rather than seek to change those marginalized and oppressed by systems of power
  - Conformity and assimilation of those on the margins does not eradicate unearned privilege
My work and approach: Shifting the Center

My colleagues and I work in **partnership** with individuals and families who reside on the social and economic margins of our society.

Our approach is called Community-based Participatory Research and Action (CBPR).

Together, we collectively work to:

- Build **trusted** partnerships
- **Understand** each other and our lived experiences recognizing we occupy different social spaces, face different challenges, and have access to different opportunities
- Better **align** services/interventions
- Be more **responsive** to families, meeting them where they are to promote well-being and positive outcomes
- Change systems to address/redress structural violence and inequality
Engagement “ASKS”? 

- Let’s create GRACIOUS SPACE (http://www.ethicalleadership.org/)
- Let’s listen with open hearts and minds
- Let’s keep our egos, judgments, and assumptions in check
- Let’s create a safe space to allow for vulnerability and growth
- Let’s be gentle with the self and others
- Let’s commit to testing out at least one new skill in our relational toolkit
**Intersectionality**

**Goal of intersectionality:** to transform knowledge so it is more inclusive, comprehensive, complex, and fair, thereby fostering social justice

Recognizes that our lives are structured and regulated by social systems....

See:
Matrix of Privilege and Domination

Intersecting Axes of Privilege, Domination, and Oppression

PRACTICE #1

“Get on the LINE”

- How can we work to authentically connect with the self and another person (without judgment or bias)?

- Recognize we are all connected
Practice #2
Critical Self-Reflexivity

- Self-reflexivity: the process of exercising critical consciousness
- It is a process that depends on the idea of a transforming self, continuously emerging and changing as we interact with others, the environment, and the public
- Self-reflexivity is a “dialogue with the self” about its fundamental assumptions and values
- Through this radical process of critiquing our beliefs and ideologies we remain open to change
Critical Self-Reflexivity

- Pollner (1991) describes radical reflexivity as “an ‘unsettling,’ i.e., an insecurity regarding the basic assumptions, discourse and practices used in describing reality”

- Reflexivity incorporates a critical examination of past and present, of what passes as ‘good’ knowledge and practice, and how this influences our ways of knowing/practicing
Critical Self-Reflexivity

- Reflexive process: ‘Expert’ knowledge about reality questioned
  - Objectivism = assumes development of value-free knowledge and practice possible
  - Objective knowledge = the ‘rational’ standard against which all other forms of knowledge and practice are judged
  - Our view of reality and explanations/accuracy of that reality taken for granted as the “right” way of knowing
Critical Self-Reflexivity

- Reflexivity questions existence of objective reality/knowledge
- Recognizes that we construct the world and our knowledge of the world based on our White majority theoretical assumptions
- These assumptions have a major influence on intellectual/social practice → form the basis for defining, judging, and valuing others
Critical Self-Reflexivity

Question everything!
- Who is “expert” and who has expert knowledge?
- Whose values are being honored?
- Whose view of reality is privileged?
- What is in the best interest of families…Whose families?
- Why do we act the way we do…If our goal is connection, how are we doing?
- What are our goals again?

Ask: What must life be like….?
Intersectionality and Reflexivity

- Examining social location based on R/C/G
  - Situating self/others within social structural systems of power and privilege
- Recognizing “standpoint epistemology”
- Deconstructing “knowings”

http://www.ted.com/talks/lang/eng/chimamanda_a_dichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story.html
Challenges and Opportunities

Being Stuck: Getting unstuck

- Guilt, shame, judgment: Create Gracious Space
- Criticism: Generate compassion, empathy, and cultural humility
- Power: Share power and develop mutuality
- Control: Allow for vulnerability; Lead by being led
- Aloneness and disconnection: Build bridges, foster partnerships, seek help, grow supports, connect, be an ally, take action
- Status quo: You must be the change you wish to see in the world – Ghandi