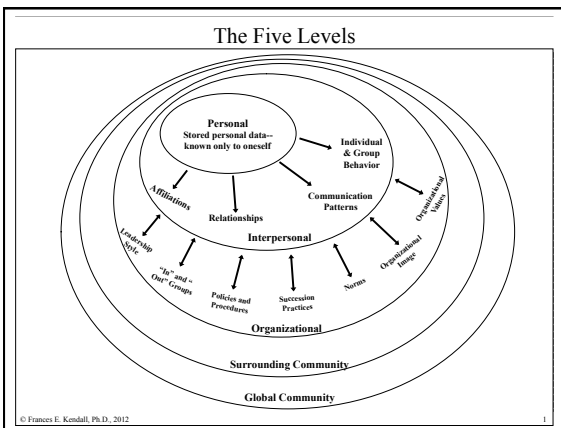


“White Public Space”--How It Is Created and What We Can Do to Change It

Frances E. Kendall, Ph.D.
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What Is “White Public Space”?

- ❖ White public space is a set of interconnected routine strategies that work together to sustain the subordination of people of color by white people.
- ❖ It holds systemic white privilege in place because together they surround and support the dominating white ways of the “professional” class.
- ❖ Within white public space, white people learn how to behave *as whites*, colluding with racism in ways we don’t necessarily see, and based in some ways on our socioeconomic class, act with impunity.

†Taken from Page, Helán and R. Brooke Thomas, “White Public Space and the Construction of White Privilege In U.S. Healthcare: Fresh Concepts and a New Model of Analysis.” *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, 8 (1), 109-116, March 1994.

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What Is “White Public Space?” (Cont’d)

- ❖ While people of color are in and out of white public spaces all the time, the sense is always there that they are in white-owned spaces where white people dominate.
- ❖ Sometimes white people make that clear. More often the clues are embedded in the ways in which routines are carried out.
- ❖ By learning how to behave in white public space, people of color must also “reinforce routine strategies that sustain the power relations,” knowing at all times that their presence isn’t valued. Generally they are forced to become at least outwardly compliant.

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How Does “White Public Space” Recreate Itself?

- ❖ “To sustain the white privilege created, white public space had to be *continually able to* transform its capacity to reshape its racial control practices.” (Page and Thomas, p. 111) Think prisons, public schools.
- ❖ There is daily re-construction of reality in which white people dominate.
- ❖ It reconstructs itself in a multitude of ways, for example, by openly valuing those who are determined as “normal” and denigrating those who are constructed as deviant and subhuman, e.g. “illegal aliens.”
- ❖ Even with shifting demographics, white people retain their dominance by remaining the gatekeepers who decide which people of color will get to share in the resources.

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Tangible Resources

- ❖ In white public space, there are resources that are tangible:
 - Sales territories
 - Markets
 - Tools
 - Infrastructure

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Symbolic Resources

- ❖ In white public space, there are resources that are symbolic—symbolic because they are obliquely indicative of how racial power relationships are kept in place. Symbolic resources include the power to:
 - decide and when and where.
 - determine who has power.
 - create structures, e.g., colleges, schools, fraternities, prisons, and to determine and enforce the rules by which they run.
 - publish and to determine who else gets to do that.
 - bestow official and not-so-official approval on someone, some idea, and/or some action.

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Symbolic Resources (Cont'd)

- ❖ Symbolic resources include the power to:
 - determine membership in organizations.
 - license and/or certify—citizenship, qualifications, worthiness.
 - insure that race and racism are not talked about by pleading color-blindness.
 - control information, its representation, and its dissemination.
 - focus on individuals and isolated incidents rather than acknowledging the larger picture.
 - exclude people of color from competition and even acknowledged existence.

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White Public Space in Language

- ❖ In white public space boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable are essential.
- ❖ Gatekeepers of white public space in language—teachers, court officers, police—keep any mixture of English and another language out if it is a language spoken by a non-white group.
- ❖ Thirty-one states have English as the “official” language; official identification papers, contracts, laws, and so on must be in English only.

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White Public Space in Language (Cont'd)

- ❖ “Mock Spanish” is fake Spanish co-opted and assimilated into English by white people.
- ❖ When white people use “mock Spanish” or Spanish accents they believe they look more multicultural.
- ❖ Using “mock Spanish” belittles Spanish language and culture. Anthropologist Jane Hill calls it “covert racist dialogue.”[†]
- ❖ When white people protest Mock Spanish they are accused of being the PC Police or “too sensitive.”

[†]Hill, Jane H. “Language, Race, and White Public Space.” *American Anthropologist*, 100 (3), 680-689, September 1998.

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White Public Space in Language (Cont'd)

- ❖ “Mock Spanish” occurs at all levels: the personal and interpersonal—“hasta pasta,” “adios,”—or using pretend Spanish accents in “playful” interactions, and in other actions across racial lines where the white person wants to appear “cool” and “down.”
- ❖ It also occurs at the organizational level as a way of selling merchandise—“Yo quiero Taco Bell”—and as a way of making a point—then-Ambassador to the UN Madeleine Albright to the Security Council: Castro showed, “not *cajones*, but cowardice.”[†]

[†]Hill, p. 683.

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White Public Space in Language (Cont'd)

- ❖ The “crossover” between Ebonics and upper-class or “proper” English is harder to separate out because of decades of entanglement. However in the white-determined order, African American English is definitely substandard and indicates ignorance.
- ❖ There are too many examples to count: “whasup?” “bro,” “hey, girlfriend,” “I’m just sayin’,” “Oh no you didn’t just say that,” “chillin with my homies,” and on and on.
- ❖ “[P]eople who are not white and who successfully negotiate the white world order are vulnerable to the accusation that they are ‘acting White,’ betraying their friends and relatives.”[†]

[†]Hill, p. 683.

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White Public Space in History

- ❖ Any mixture of history that genuinely tells the story of people of color and/or American's treatment of them goes outside the bounds of white public space. The additional information threatens the Master Narrative, and is removed or watered down. Examples:
 - Arizona state law SB1070
 - Tucson, Arizona's removal of Ethnic Studies
 - Texas's Board of Education downgrading the role of people of color in state-adopted history textbooks.
 - The "white" story of Miss Rosa Parks
 - Any mixture of language in public documents, e.g., translations for voting or obtaining licenses is carefully monitored.

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Daily Work Tasks

- ❖ Why do we need to know about public white space and what can we do to change it?
 - The more we know about the supremacy of whiteness and how it is maintained, the better we are able to identify targets of change.
 - For example, understanding that reconstruction is constant allows a change agent to expect it to happen, to monitor how it occurs, and to use our area of influence to redirect it if possible.

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Daily Work Tasks (Cont'd)

- ❖ Remembering that the surrounding community is an extension of an institution's white public space causes us to monitor the interaction between the two spaces far more carefully.
- ❖ Potentially, the surrounding community is, at times, the more efficacious of the change targets.
- ❖ Studying the symbolic resources and how they work allows change agents to refine change processes to be more effective.

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