

White Women—Protectors of the Status Quo; Positioned to Disrupt It

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The scene is set in the final moments of an experiential Group Relations conference organized around the theme of examining the relationship between diversity and authority in group and organizational life. The staff and members (about 75 people) are gathered in the conference discussion—a plenary meeting where all the participants have the opportunity to participate in an open discussion about what was learned about diversity and authority (and what was not) over the course of the three-day conference. One member shares histegret that the work in the conference was not deeper, was not more collaborative, particularly, he says, he regrets there was not more interaction and engagement among people from diverse backgrounds.

A young, White woman begins to share her reflections on the conference. She speaks in a high-pitched, but clear, voice; her words are articulate, and her tone is earnest and insistent. She says she wanted to do deeper work in the conference, she wanted to reach out to others who did not look like her, but because it “was not safe,” she was not welcomed. She takes a breath before continuing when she is interrupted. A 40-something African-American woman begins to speak. Her voice has a deep, resonant tone and urgent cadence as she counters the White woman’s point. She says White women always want it to be safe before they act, White women always want the conditions to be just right before they will take a risk, but then it is not any risk at all. She says that waiting to “feel safe” is a privilege of White women. It is never “safe” for women of color to speak up, to share their point of view, to ask for what they want or deserve; yet they do it anyway because they have no choice. The Black woman’s voice grows louder and more commanding. She says White women need to own up to all they get from being White and being close to White men. White women, she says, are too busy getting what they can from White men and from being White themselves, while all the while talking about how oppressed they are as women. With all that, she says, women of color will never “welcome” White women as “sisters.”

The room is perfectly still, and the air is thick with the impact of her words. All are riveted as this woman finishes her last sentence, and as she does, the conference ends. Members and staff move into an informal post-conference social gathering, milling about and chatting loudly with one another. In a corner of the room, the White woman is in tears. Other young, White women are patting her back, murmuring to her, consoling her.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter is about what White women do to hold on to White privilege and the costs and benefits associated with holding on. It is also about what White women might be able to do and who we might be able to be if we disavow such privilege, an act that has both benefits and costs. This chapter will explore the particular role of White women in group life and White women's contribution to the exploration of diversity in the U.S. from a Group Relations perspective. White women's standing is unique in society's power structure. Indeed, every social identity group has a particular position in race relations, and each group is related to and influences each other in particular ways based on this position. This chapter suggests that White women's relatedness to White men and to people of color shapes their interactions at every level of group analysis including interpersonal, group-as-a-whole, intergroup, inter-organizational, and society-as-a-whole. The focus of diversity work has mostly been on people of color and to some extent the relationship between people of color and Whites. Using a Group Relations analysis to explore White women as a group is a means of understanding the relatedness of White women to other social identity groups. Further, this chapter posits that White women are critical in maintaining the status quo of race relations. That is, White women are uniquely placed to protect or disrupt White male privilege and power.

This work is a discussion of White women. As a White woman myself, this chapter is written in a White woman's voice. At times, that voice is confident, passionate, and authentic, such as when I'm writing from my own experience and my experience can be easily grounded in the literature. At other times, my voice is hesitant and muted. After reading a draft of this chapter, a colleague told me, "You start out strong and powerful, and then you get really heady and distance the reader. It's confusing." My writing is "heady" and intellectual when I feel the need to distance myself from the material, to make this work more scholarly, to attribute controversial ideas solely to others, and to describe White women "out there" as though I am not one of them, particularly when a topic is too provocative to come close to it emotionally. At times, I felt these ideas were powerful and essential, if frightening. At other times, I wanted to dismiss them as oversimplifications, overgeneralizations, and anecdotal. My experience writing this chapter was linked to the experience of reading it. Further, the process of writing this chapter, and of reading it, must also reflect its content. A friend and colleague who helped edit this chapter said to me of this work, "It's risky to say, and it's risky to read. In reading and writing this chapter, there is a lot to be lost." I have to agree.

This chapter uses a Group Relations framework to examine how White women are positioned to protect or disrupt the status quo of White male privilege and power. Critical to this analysis is the notion of intergroup embeddedness. Group Relations theory suggests that within a given system, the relationship between two groups depends not only on how they deal with each other, but also on the relationship each group has with the superordinate group in the larger system. Applied to race relations, embeddedness refers

to the extent to which power differences between racial groups at the societal level are mirrored in the relations between these groups at the organizational and intergroup level. Thus, White women occupy a particular position in relation to White men, the most powerful group in society, as well as to women of color and men of color. Using a Group Relations perspective to understand White women's particular roles in group and systems has implications for theory and practice. This chapter will end with the implications of exploring White women's unique position in race relations.

The Tavistock tradition of the study of group dynamics and Group Relations focuses on a group-as-a-whole level of analysis. Group-as-a-whole theory suggests that group members are inextricably interwoven via an unconscious, tacit agreement of shared fantasies and collusive projections which form the group's "*élan vital*" or "Gestalt" (Wells, 1990, p. 55). Group-as-a-whole theory is a useful framework for examining the role of social identity variables in group life and in society in that each social identity group contributes to the Gestalt. This includes the notion that White women have a particular predisposition or valence for specific qualities and characteristics in groups and systems that they then enact on *behalf* of the entire group. This chapter will focus on three aspects of White women's unique contribution to the *élan* of groups as a result of race and gender.

First, research and data from the psychological literature about White women's gender roles, gender role socialization, and relationships with White men will be presented to frame this analysis. Critical areas where White women's gender roles, gender role socialization, and male-female relationships in the U.S. differ from those of U.S. Black women or other women of color, both historically and currently, will be highlighted. Second, specific projections White women receive in groups and systems will be explored as well as what White women project onto others. White women's particular valence or pre-disposition to collude with the projections of others will also be discussed. Third, the chapter will include hypotheses regarding White women's contribution to maintaining the status quo of current race relations. This will include a discussion of the costs and benefits of White women recognizing, acknowledging, and transforming the interplay of their race and gender in groups, systems, and the society at large.

HISTORICAL ROLES OF WHITE WOMEN

White women's typical (stereotypical) roles in groups, organizations, and systems today have roots in historical images, norms, and practices of American society regarding White and Black females. Black and White women have historically been held to different standards about femininity (Davis, 1981; hooks, 1981; King, 1975; Ladner, 1971; Welter, 1983). During the time of slavery, Black women were expected to work in the fields and were subject to harsh conditions and brutal beatings just as their male counterparts were. White women, on the other hand, were considered pure, docile, fragile, and in need of protection (Palmer, 1983; Perkins, 1983; Welter, 1983). White women's role was referred to as the "angel in the house" based on a

book of poems by the same name which was extremely popular during the 19th century (Giddings, 1984). The “cult of true womanhood” emerged as a set of standards for White women who desired access to society’s most powerful circles (Welter, 1983, p. 372). True womanhood emphasized innocence, piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity for White women. Education in true womanhood taught women’s “natural position of subordination” and highlighted women as loving wives and mothers (Perkins, 1983, p. 18). Yet during that time period, Black women’s true womanhood followed a different path. White society scarcely acknowledged Black women as female. Indeed, the ideals of White womanhood—submissiveness, docility, fragility—were the antithesis of Black women’s lives during slavery and for many years following (Perkins, 1983). Black women, by contrast, were seen as laborers, and therefore a definition of Black womanhood was constructed that included a tradition of hard work, perseverance, self-reliance, tenacity, and resistance (Davis, 1981).

Differences between the roles and expectations of Black and White women can be seen to this day throughout the modern feminist movement. During the 1960s and 70s, while White women were fighting for “meaningful” job opportunities outside the home and an escape from the oppressive tyranny of being housewives stuck in a suburban wasteland, Black women were struggling against racism and sexism in the workforce (Giddings, 1984, p. 299). The problems of White, middle-class housewives were alien to many Black women who had a long history in the labor force and had different needs from the White women’s movement. Comas-Diaz and Greene (1994) maintained that Black women have not been held to the traditional gender roles of their White counterparts. Black women are said to value assertiveness, independence, self-confidence, and sexual assuredness (Lewis, 1975; Reid, 1988; Reid, Haritos, Kelly, & Holland, 1995). Black female’s conceptions of womanhood include self-reliance, strength, resourcefulness, autonomy, and the responsibility of providing for the financial as well as emotional needs of the family (Dugger, 1988; Ladner, 1971; Malson, 1983).

Over reliance on male approval, ambivalence and anxiety over contradictory roles and passivity and non-assertiveness are not characteristics that apply to many women of color. By contrast, Black working class women use aggressive action rather than passivity as a survival mechanism. As a result they are often viewed antagonistically by Whites as unfeminine (Zinn, Cannon, Higgenbotham, Dill and Thornton, 1986, p. 298).

Children are socialized to gender roles in their families, at school, in their communities, and via the larger culture and society in which they live (Bem, 1983). Several scholars suggest that Black mothers are more likely to teach their daughters not to subscribe to traditional ideas about femininity (Comas-Diaz & Greene, 1994; Debold, Wilson, & Malave, 1993; Goodman, 1990; Greene, 1990). Black mothers help to socialize their daughters as both gendered and “raced” beings (Greene, 1990) and therefore direct their daughters to be strong, resilient, and independent in order to face the challenges of a racist society (Turner, 1987; Ward, 1990). Furthermore, Black mothers instruct their daughters not to rely on men to support them financially

(Debold, Wilson, & Malave, 1993; Joseph & Lewis, 1981). Black men face racism and discrimination in the labor market that severely hinders their ability to be the sole breadwinner in their families. In addition, the relatively high percentage of Black female-headed households necessitates Black women's ability to be financially independent (Palmer, 1983).

White girls are not taught to be resilient against racism, however, as they do not experience racial oppression. White girls are taught to be nurturing and empathic, but not necessarily with the same focus on being independent and strong. Palmer (1983) suggested that many White mothers can expect their daughters to be supported by their future husbands and thus need not command their daughters to be self-reliant. Instead, many White girls are taught to be quiet, submissive, good, or even “perfect”—qualities that a man would find attractive (Brown & Gilligan, 1992). White girls are then taught to give up their power, self-reliance, and independence in exchange for protection and financial security (Debold, Wilson, & Malave, 1993). Hurtado (1989) put it this way:

White, middle-class women are groomed from birth to be the lovers, mothers, and partners (however unequal) of White men because of the economic and social benefits attached to these roles. Upper and middle-class White women are supposed to be the biological bearers of those members of the next generation who will inherit positions of power in society. Women of color, in contrast, are groomed from birth to be primarily the lovers, mothers, and partners (however unequal) of men of color, who are also oppressed by White men. The avenues of advancement through marriage that are open to White women who conform to prescribed standards of middle-class femininity are not even a theoretical possibility for most women of color. This is not to say that women of color are more oppressed than White women, but rather, that White men use different forms of enforcing oppression of White women and women of color. As a consequence, these groups of women have different political responses and skills... (p. 843).

While White women may also value courage and self-reliance, they potentially face different consequences for asserting themselves than do women of color. Assertive White women risk being judged unfeminine, and as a result, being rejected by White men. Women of color, who have a different relationship to White men, need different coping strategies and hence have developed distinct behaviors and responses.

Intergroup embeddedness in Group Relations theory suggests that there is an inter-relatedness among White men, White women, men of color, and women of color. In addition, the relationships among White women, women of color, and men of color are affected by each group's relation to the dominant group, White men. White women are in the unique position of being able to produce “racially pure” offspring for White men, offspring who will be the next generation of power in society. Hurtado (1989) suggested that White women are seduced into being the partners of White men under the pretense of sharing power. Yet, it is a pretense because the partnership and the power are unequal. “The patriarchal invitation to power is only

a pretended choice for White women because...their inclusion is dependent on complete and constant submission” (Hurtado, 1989, p. 845). Were White women to disrupt the system, change their position, renounce unearned White privilege, and refuse the role White men have prescribed for them of being a complicit partner in maintaining the status quo, the entire structure of race relations might be altered. White women’s silence on the reality of this position preserves their own racial power while it ensures their gender oppression. What keeps White women from exposing White male patriarchy to free themselves to be more authentic and truly powerful? A complex interaction between White women’s roles in groups, what White women contain on behalf of others, and White women’s collusion collectively help to keep the status quo in place.

WHITE WOMEN’S ROLES IN GROUPS

It is hypothesized that White women’s roles in groups, organizations, and systems have their roots in socialization processes along gender and racial lines. I have worked to understand my own racial identity and researched, read, taught, and written about issues related to diversity and Group Relations over many years; I have also participated as both staff and member in numerous Group Relations conferences, some designed specifically to understand the relationship between Group Relations and diversity. Following are some examples of my impressions of who White women are in groups.

White women take up the role of “the good girl” in groups and systems. They are the ones who take copious notes, raise their hands to ask questions, sit in the front row, and nod their heads at the leader. I teach a university graduate-level course on group dynamics in New York City. The front row of my classroom is usually filled with White women who are “good,” obedient students. Of course, the White female students’ behavior is probably also influenced by the fact that I, as their professor, am also a White female. The White women’s proclivity to support and ally with me due to identifying with me is likely strong. It is my experience, however, that these White women’s obedient behavior is also related to the pressures and expectations imposed on them, however unconsciously, by traditional gender roles that dictate how White females are supposed to act. Again, these behaviors are reminiscent of traditional definitions of feminine goodness from the 19th century, as well as of Gilligan and Brown’s more modern “perfect girl” (1992).

I have also interestingly experienced the opposite behavior from the White women (usually young) in my class. These White women are the students who whisper and pass notes to each other during my lectures; they are the students who arrive late and leave early. One hypothesis is that they have internalized the projections that White women are passive, docile, submissive; the opposite of powerful and authoritative. They perhaps cannot see themselves as having the authority, power, and competence to be a university professor. Thus, they perhaps cannot authorize me, a young, White woman, in that role either.

White women take on the role of being fragile or emotionally sensitive in groups. They are the ones who cry. White women's historical legacy is that of delicateness and fragility. I have yet to be a participant in a Group Relations conference as staff or member when a White woman did not burst into tears, silently weep, or leave the room wiping her eyes in the middle of a group session. Of course, others cry in Group Relations conferences as well, including people of color and White men. White women, however, seem to have a particular valence or predisposition for it. It is certainly more socially acceptable for White women to cry than it is for men of any race to do so. After all, White women are the "angels in the house" needing protection and care, and their gender role seems to demand tears.

White women often interact predictably with White men in groups and systems taking on the role of being White men's protectors and supporters. White women benefit from unearned privilege and authority through their Whiteness, but also by their access to White male privilege in their relationships with White men. Bell and Nkomo (2001) conducted a study for which they interviewed 825 Black and White women managers across the U.S. about race and gender dynamics at work among other things. They noted, "[White] women are quick to come to the defense of their White male supporters, often acting as their talking heads, echoing and supporting their views and values to fellow workers" (p. 241). One of the participants in the study described White women's access to White men in this way, "White women are very familiar to White men. This is someone they know. This could be their sister, their daughter, their mother or the girl next door. They are comfortable with these women" (p. 241). Indeed, White women are typically the mothers, sisters, daughters, wives, and lovers of White men. It seems likely that pairing with a very powerful group in society (e.g., White men) would be a different experience than pairing with those in society who are often denied power and authority (e.g., men of color) because of racism and discrimination. White women may then be particularly susceptible to traditional notions of femininity and strategies to maintain intimacy with White men because they rely on the conferred dominance (McIntosh, 1989) afforded White men. Black women and other women of color, by contrast, do not or cannot rely on White male privilege (Hurtado, 1989). Bell and Nkomo (2001) asserted:

Because of White women's perceived access to White men, many Black women believe a White woman...has the upper hand in advancing her own career. She learns from the master players—White men. But she gets caught in a bind when it comes to speaking out against company practices. Speaking out jeopardizes her fragile status (p. 241).

A Black female colleague, a university professor, related the following incident that seemed to reflect this dynamic. Students in her class were required to give an in-class presentation on a chosen topic related to diversity and higher education, and each would receive feedback publicly in class from the professor and other students. One of the White male students gave a particularly poor presentation. His research was shoddy and incomplete, and his arguments were unorganized and vague. The professor offered critical feedback detailing where his presentation needed improvement. One by

one, White women in the class raised their hands and defended him, stating his research was cogent and his arguments sound. The students of color in the class and the other White males remained silent. Of course, there are many possible hypotheses to explain this interaction. Perhaps the students of color did not want to publicly disagree with a Black professor, perhaps the White women who spoke in defense of the White, male student happened to think he did a good job, or were friends with him. Yet, it is also possible, that the White women were acting to defend “their” man, albeit unconsciously, because their privilege depended in some degree on preserving his. In addition, it may have been important for these White women to defend a White man against the disapproval, criticism, or aggression of a Black woman. In this example, preserving White privilege necessitated supporting a White man, but also rejecting Black female authority.

In Group Relations conferences as a member and staff person, I have seen White women authorize White men as leaders and defend and protect White men despite their seeming irresponsibility, incompetence, or even, abusiveness. I have seen White women pair with White men insistently, repeatedly, often at the expense or exclusion of other women, both White and of color. I was on staff of a Group Relations conference entitled, *Whiteness and Authority*, where the staff was all White by design, in part, so as to examine White authority explicitly rather than to keep it hidden as the implicit standard. I was deployed as the Large Study Group Team Leader in this conference and worked with a team of four, another woman, and two men. The other woman on the team, the Conference Director, was somewhat racially ambiguous. Although she identified as White, her skin color was the same hue as some who identify as people of color. The two male Large Study Group Team members included an olive-skinned, Jewish male in his thirties, with dark brown hair and eyes, and a 50-something Protestant male with light hair and eyes, and fair skin. At one point in our team’s work, it became apparent that I was attempting to pair with the older White male and to exclude the Director and the younger male. One hypothesis was that I was trying to “push out the color” in our team and create an Aryan pair of the older, “Whiter” male and me. By aligning with, supporting, and protecting the older, Whiter male, I might increase my own access to unearned White male privilege and power and diminish the power of those “of color.”

A major theme emerged at this conference concerning whether or not there were “enough seats at the table,” that is, whether or not power and authority could be shared among a diverse group or could only be held by a homogenous White few. If there was unconscious or conscious concern that there might be limited access to power and authority, it follows that I, as the White female team leader, might represent and enact the wish and attempt to protect one’s own privilege at all costs, in this case, by pairing with the Whitest male. This dynamic echoes the typical roles and behaviors White women have adopted throughout history as a means of securing their own resources through relationships with White men, even if it means excluding, abandoning, or extruding people of color. In addition, it’s possible that

the Large Study Group team and the members of the Large Group may also (consciously or unconsciously) have wanted the “Whitest” team members to pair as this would be a simpler, more familiar representation of those in power. Thus, the entire system may have colluded in preserving this pair and by extension, the status quo.

White women may take on the role of being oppressed in groups and systems. White women are in a position of being vulnerable to oppression based on their gender and capable of oppression based on their race. White women certainly experience prejudice and discrimination both personally and institutionally because they are female. Gender bias is real and has serious, deleterious consequences. Yet, in Group Relations conferences or work groups where White women and women of color are present, I have repeatedly seen White women’s confusion, disappointment, and anger when women of color do not join with them (us) as “sisters” in the fight against sexism. For White women, discrimination is gender-based, while women of color face the “double jeopardy” of being female and a member of a visible racial/ethnic group. For women of color, eschewing sexism may necessitate betraying men of color, who are loved and needed allies in the battle against racism. Women of color frequently (painfully) need to choose their battles, and racism, by comparison to sexism, is often the more deadly threat. Therefore, White women have a different experience of sexism than do women of color, yet White women frequently seem to expect that sisterhood should trump all when faced with the male oppressor regardless of whether that oppressor is White or of color. White women often seem unaware that although denouncing sexism risks their connection to White men (and presumably men of color), it does not alter unearned privilege based on their Whiteness. Women of color, on the other hand, do not have skin color privilege and as such face different consequences in speaking out against sexism. They risk losing their connection with men of color with whom they are allied in the fight against racism without the cushion of unearned White privilege afforded White women.

White women have historically focused on their gender oppression largely to the exclusion of their race privilege. The field of psychology in general, and feminist psychology in particular, with rare exception, has ignored White women’s Whiteness and only examined the impact of race when women of color are included in a sample. Thus, the psychology of women in large part has neglected the differentiation among women and instead, has presented theories and studies that suggest there is a “universal woman” (Reid & Kelly, 1994, p. 477; Spelman, 1988; Yoder & Kahn, 1993). This concept of the universal woman implies that gender is a primary experience for all women and that differences among women such as race, ethnicity, class, religion, sexual orientation, and so on are secondary to the female experience. Yet, femaleness varies across a wide variety of social identities. When White women refuse to acknowledge this variation, along with accompanying status and power differences as noted in the opening example of this chapter, it is increasingly difficult for them to work authentically across racial boundaries with women of color.

Women of color's mistrust of White women's attempts to join together in fighting sexism has disturbing, historical roots. During the suffrage movement of the early 20th century, White suffragettes originally sought the right to vote for all women, regardless of race. As a movement to grant Black men voting rights gathered momentum, however, White feminists spoke out angrily about their superiority to Black males, and their inherent right as Whites to participate in the U.S. political process (Giddings, 1984). White feminists quickly abandoned their Black sisters when their White privilege was threatened. These historical underpinnings of the relationship among women of all races have meaning today in groups and systems. White women, who ignore their race privilege and focus solely on their gender oppression, deny a fundamental piece of who they are and the status, power, and authority (however unearned) they have. Is it any wonder that women of color have difficulty welcoming White women as sisters?

One way White women attempt to obfuscate the issue of their race privilege is by focusing on a social identity other than race: ethnicity, class, religion, or sexual orientation. I have been in many Group Relations conferences where White women, who are pressed (usually by people of color) to acknowledge their White skin privilege, have said, "Well I'm not really White, I'm Jewish." Or, "I may be White, but I'm a lesbian, so I'm doubly oppressed just like women of color." After giving an invited seminar on White privilege and psychotherapy at a college counseling center, a White female therapist approached me afterward and said, "I don't think White privilege applies to me because my parents are working class."

Rather than exploring their Whiteness and femaleness and the intersection of a third social identity, it seems White women would rather just forget their own race all together and explore rather, for example, being a Jewish woman, lesbian woman, or working class woman. In addition, I have observed that White women in groups seem to disregard Whiteness to emphasize another oppressed group to which they belong. I have yet to be in a group conference where a White woman says, "Yes, I'm White, but I'm also upper class and that's more important to me." It seems White women are quick to highlight their experience of oppression based on gender, or other minority identities, especially when interacting with people of color. This appears to be an attempt to disavow their capacity to be oppressive, and perhaps, to identify with people of color's experience, as a means of collaborating across racial boundaries. It may additionally be an attempt to increase their sense of being oppressed so as to gain power with the idea that among disenfranchised groups, the more oppressed you are the more power you have. What seems more difficult to do, however, is for White women to attempt to explore their capacity to be oppressive both via their own skin color and through their access to White male privilege. White women who work to understand their own racial identity would be engaging in a more authentic self-exploration and hence may be more capable of meaningful cross-racial interactions.

WHAT WHITE WOMEN CONTAIN

How are roles based on gender and race assigned and enacted in groups and why? Wells (1990) noted that groups use defense mechanisms such as projective identification and splitting to combat anxiety with resulting role differentiation. Projective identification is a psychological process whereby one unconsciously splits off disavowed, disowned, or ambivalent characteristics (e.g., rage, incompetence, or weakness) and deposits them into another individual or sub-group; the other(s) is then encouraged to express those traits on behalf of the individual who disavowed them. Splitting refers to the unconscious process of dividing the world into disparate parts such that one aspect is contained in an individual or sub-group and its opposite in another. These processes contribute to the formation and maintenance of roles in groups and systems. Roles are interdependent and interwoven such that together they contribute to the group-as-a-whole's Gestalt (Wells, 1990). Groups circumscribe conflicts into sub-groups of members who enact these conflicts on behalf of the entire group. Members who are not actively participating in a given conflict nonetheless experience it vicariously. Non-participants are, therefore, just as involved in the expression of conflict as those who are actively enacting it.

Group Relations theory suggests the particular roles White women take up in groups are, in part, based on projective processes of the group-as-a-whole. White women have a particular valence, or pre-disposition, for these roles and hence collude in internalizing the projections of others and expressing them. Yet, groups also work to keep White women in these roles (and other sub-groups in other roles) because doing so serves the group in some way. What is projected onto White women and why? What do White women project onto others? How do these projections serve the group-as-a-whole?

The above paragraphs have outlined the process of projection to which White women are subject in groups. White women receive projections of being docile, fragile, submissive, and in need of protection. They are expected (sometimes unconsciously) to be selfless, nurturing, passive, and quiet. Lest the reader scoff at these traditional stereotypes of White women as outdated or irrelevant in the 21st century, more recent works have suggested women must continue to display "traditional" qualities to be accepted in the workplace. Ann Richards, former governor of Texas, was recently quoted as saying:

We try to feed into this pattern of acceptability that seems to be so important, particularly in running for public office or trying to become the CEO of a corporation. You have still got to make the pretense that you are also being a wife and mother, that you're keeping the house clean, and giving parties—when women have no more time to do all that than men do who fill those jobs. But we still play the game because we think or we hope that we will get some acceptance (Clift & Brazaitis, 2000, p. 323).

How do White women taking on these roles serve the group-as-a-whole? First, it allows others (men, women of color) to disavow distasteful parts of themselves by depositing those qualities on the "other"—White women. Miller (1976) argued that because women are in a lower status position in society

in relation to men, they develop personality characteristics that reflect this subordination and help them cope with it. She wrote that females develop “an inability to act, to decide, to think, and the like—weakness, and helplessness” because of their gender subordination (p. 7). She further added that subordinates who express these characteristics are deemed well-adjusted. Hence, White women who take on these projections are judged normal and are accepted. White women who attempt to reject such rigid role prescriptions are then subject to being deemed deviant, unacceptable, or incompetent. Women of color and men may collude in maintaining White women in these roles, however, as doing so potentially frees them from having to experience these vulnerable and demeaning qualities. They can watch as a White woman leaves a room in tears and think, “What’s her problem?” or “Not me.” All social identity groups have a stake in locking White women into these narrow, rigid, subordinate roles and proclaiming them normal. A White woman who attempts to resist such roles is then seen as pathological and can be made to feel crazy.

It could be argued that White women’s experience of vulnerability and weakness is directly related to men’s or White men’s experience of being formidable and strong. White women’s role in groups of needing protection could then also be seen as directly connected to Black women’s roles of being self-reliant, independent, and tough. Women of color and men may have some investment in maintaining White women in stereotypical roles, as doing so releases them from having to own or experience those disagreeable parts in themselves.

WHITE WOMEN’S COLLUSION

Yet, projective processes in groups are more complex than is apparent in the above analysis and often far less benign. While groups project these various qualities onto White women, White women collude with these projections. That is, White women also have an investment in maintaining these stereotypical roles. When White women are passive and docile, Black women are left with rage and aggression. White women who ignore their capacity to be oppressive may not want to own their hostility and ability to hurt or harm. It may be far more palatable for White women to maintain the image of being sweet, passive, and submissive, or oppressed, than capable of intense rage, racism, and violence. Connolly and Noumair (1997) wrote, “For a White woman to ask a Black woman to carry her anger is to collude with the maintenance of parochial racial and gender stereotypes whereby we construct ‘angry Black women’ and ‘powerless White women’” (p. 329).

White women may also be invested in colluding with these projections as they facilitate their access to White male privilege. For White women to speak out against their traditional gender roles is to break from their alliance with White men. In particular, White women who acknowledge and eschew their unearned White skin privilege may then force White men to acknowledge theirs. White women who demand an inquiry into Whiteness necessitate an examination of a major piece of White male power—conferred

dominance based on skin color—and as such, may no longer be the welcome partners of White men in sharing (however unequally) that dominance. White women, then, risk losing their access to White male privilege if they fend off projections based on gender and race. White men then have much to gain by keeping White women in these roles for the same reasons. If White women abandon White men by speaking out about Whiteness, White men's power is at risk of being deconstructed. Connolly and Noumair (1997) stated, "White women have been used as a prophylactic against interrupting patriarchy" (p. 331). Deconstructing White male power includes revealing the myth of meritocracy. Rejecting unearned White privilege means debunking the idea that those who are in power have unequivocally earned their position, rather than they have unduly benefited from a racist, sexist society and that their conferred dominance is based on being White and male. The notion of meritocracy benefits White women as Whites and as partners of White men. Exposing the myth of meritocracy means White women and men must question whether or not their power and authority have been earned.

IMPLICATIONS

What would disrupting the status quo look like? White women who acknowledge and take responsibility for their Whiteness, renounce unearned White privilege, and speak up and speak out even when it is not safe—that is, even when they risk their own privilege and their access to White men—contribute to changing the status quo of race relations in this country. White women stand to gain from fighting against gender subjugation while also rejecting unearned White privilege. They can be freed to nurture and strengthen their sense of self-agency and authorization, not by seeking connection with unearned White male dominance and staying powerless and quiet, but rather by finding their authenticity and being true to who they are in all their various social identities. White women could then potentially access their competent, active, strong, angry, and vital dimensions rather than remain stuck in a rigid role that narrowly and inaccurately defines them. White women who fulfill these narrow, rigid roles so as to preserve relationships with White men find their creativity is stifled, their passion deadened. White women who accessed these parts of themselves might then free men to take up more vulnerability and healthy dependence.

A White female executive known to the author challenged her boss publicly on an issue related to his stance on diversity in the organization that she thought was racist. She said she had suffered his views silently in the past, fearful of losing her connection to him, and as such, the power in that connection. Yet, she knew if she did not challenge him, she could no longer respect him or herself, nor could she support the organization's mission. She saw her options as submit, challenge, or leave. He accepted her feedback and worked with her and others to change his position on the organization's diversity policy. As a result, the White female executive felt re-committed to working fully and authentically for her boss and the organization. In a related way, White women who reject these rigid role prescriptions and shift

their relational position to White men, might be able both to lead and follow more authentically in groups and organizations. They would be able to authorize others to bring their full selves to work rather than to behave in stereotypical, narrow ways. Less investment in maintaining the status quo of preserving White male power could free up more possibilities for all.

For example, White women or White men and women could focus on Whiteness, or race, and other diversity issues such that people of color could be freed from the tyranny of the “diversity expert role.” That is, people of color might have more energy and desire to focus on other issues, passions, interests, etc. than those of diversity and multiculturalism. As it stands now, people of color carry these issues because White people do not, cannot, or will not. This doesn’t mean that White people would get to be diversity experts *and* have White privilege, but rather that “diversity work” would be seen as everyone’s responsibility rather than people of color’s “problem” or their sole area of expertise. In addition, White women might be more trustworthy collaborators in cross-racial interaction. White women who can acknowledge and speak to their oppressiveness and oppression and who can reject their unearned White privilege while they denounce their gender subjugation might be able to partner more authentically across racial boundaries. Black women might not be trapped in the role of “the angry one,” nor would they be asked to be continually the group’s strong and self-reliant members. Black women, then, might be able to access other parts of themselves without the pressure of constantly having to be strong and powerful. People of all races could potentially have more role freedom and in a related way, more creativity, authenticity, complexity, and personal authority.

White women would have to guard against accepting a more sophisticated version of the White female projections in the context of diversity; that is, being the “good White girls” on diversity. There are White women who authorize people of color at all costs, agree with every accusation of their own racism, automatically launch into a confession of their White privilege and its unearned benefits at the first mention of race relations. I have been that White woman myself. Indeed, the pressure to be “good” is weighty. Yet, in this context, good does not mean skillful or competent but rather obliging or obedient. A “good White girl” on diversity is reminiscent of the good White woman of the 19th century, dutiful and well-behaved, saying what she thinks others want to hear, rather than what she really believes.

Yet, a true examination of White women’s role in race relations goes beyond White women being able to call racism, their own and others. Rather, it involves White women being able to discern the interplay of White privilege and sexism, classism, homophobia and the like, along with all of these variables’ relationship to power and authority. I consulted to a Small Study Group at a Group Relations conference and subsequently had a series of conversations with a Black woman in my group where we processed some of the dynamics that occurred in the group and mutually shared our thoughts and feelings about the experience. This woman spoke of being the victim of racist projections and said she felt the group tried to make her its “Mammy” to nurture them. Further, she maintained that I colluded with the group in doing

so. At first, I felt dismayed. I liked this woman and had begun to develop a collegial relationship with her before the conference. I had hoped to continue our relationship and had anticipated working together in one capacity or another after the conference ended. Now I felt I was being accused of participating in racist projective processes. My knee-jerk reaction was to be “a good White girl.” I felt the impulse to concur immediately, agreeing that I colluded or even participated actively in a racist process. I thought I should quickly acknowledge my unearned White privilege, my racism, and my failure to authorize her as a Black woman. Yet, when I reflected further, I realized that I did not fully agree with the woman’s characterization of the dynamics and her role. I suggested that the group tried in many ways to de-authorize her because she was so competent and skillful. There were many competitive and ambitious members in her group who, I thought, tried to disempower her so as to emerge as leaders themselves. Indeed, one of the ways they attempted to unseat her was to try to make her a Mammy, the message being that she could only be accepted if she was nurturing and subservient. Yet, I offered that the group eventually discovered it could not force her into a narrow, racist role which cut off her competence; instead, the group then authorized her as a powerful leader. This process was not unrelated to race, of course, and several of the ways the group tried to challenge this woman’s leadership were racist and disturbing. Yet, the fundamental issue seemed to be how the group took in this woman’s power and authority in conjunction with her social identity rather than solely the group’s and my racism. A White woman suggesting to a Black woman that she was not solely victimized, but was also authorized, felt risky. Yet, being able to feel along the edge of this dynamic and offer it to a woman of color, knowing it might be rejected, felt more authentic than offering up an analysis of the group’s and my racism. White women need to be able to identify and interrupt their own racism and that of others, but they also need to be able to forego being held hostage to diversity issues for fear of being bad, wrong, criticized, or abandoned. By not succumbing to being a “good White girl” on diversity, I had access to more of my own competence; that is, I could consider the dynamic from a more complex perspective. This allowed for a richer understanding and a collaboration across race.

A critical examination of White women’s role in groups, organizations, and society, including in race relations has implications for diversity and Group Relations theories. The psychology of women has been criticized for perpetuating the myth of the “universal woman,” that is, as noted above, the notion that gender is a primary experience for all women that supersedes other differences that could affect their lives (Reid & Kelly, 1994). In addition, the universal woman is said to be based on a White, middle-class, heterosexual woman (Reid & Kelly, 1994) and so reflects only a segment of the female experience while proclaiming to represent all women. Examining White women’s unique position, including the role of White women’s race privilege in their lives, would challenge the notion of the universal woman. White women would not, then, be presented as the quintessential group of females as has been promulgated in the past, but rather, White women would be named as one group among many with significant within-group variation.

Indeed, White women would be seen as contributing one piece to diversity. Scrutinizing White women's position might then act as a catalyst for a shift in the entire system.

Yet, the pressure to preserve the existing power structure is exceedingly strong. We return to the seductive, familiar, and abusive status quo that holds us collectively in its tight grip. We are convinced again and again, often unconsciously, that the devil we know, the way things are now, is preferable, or at least recognizable. Interrupting the status quo often feels nearly impossible, and costs much, particularly for those in power.

White women who reject gender subjugation *and* denounce White privilege risk losing access to White male power, in addition to White male attention and affection. In my own attempts to name White privilege in the presence of White men, I have experienced what I would call "the hateful gaze of the White man." I can still picture the look on the face of a senior White male consultant during the *Whiteness and Authority* Group Relations conference when I continually brought up White privilege. He turned to me and stared with what seemed to be hatred and contempt. My experience of this look was that I had gone too far and pushed too hard against Whiteness, and this was my punishment. Losing access to power and authority through relationships with White men can feel quite devastating, even deadly. Losing the attention and affection, indeed, the love, of White men also often feels intolerable. As a White woman who has an adored White brother, a respected White father, and a beloved White husband, pulling the cover on patriarchy can literally feel like surrendering one's lifeblood.

In addition, White women who speak out about Whiteness and White privilege may find themselves sisterless. Other White women may distance themselves and withdraw their support and friendship from women who attempt to expose White privilege. Such exposure threatens their power and privilege, too. I directed a Group Relations course conference where more than half the staff were women of color. A White female staff member with whom I have a close relationship said to me with a mixture of incredulity and wariness, "You *really* authorize women of color, don't you?" Women of color (and men of color for that matter) may not trust White women who attempt to acknowledge and take responsibility for their Whiteness. After centuries of betrayal by White women, women of color may never be completely accepting of the sisterhood of White women. Collaborating with White women may complicate women of color's lives, and it may be safer for women of color to distance themselves from White women for reasons that go beyond White women's racism. Women of color have the power to dismiss and reject White women, to exclude them from sisterhood, to hurt them. Women of color risk racism, betrayal, or rejection by Whites and abandonment by other people of color in trying to join with White women. They also risk losing the power they have to reject, dismiss, and hurt White women. White women and women of color alike risk much in their attempts to work together.

Yet, White women are in the position of not having to speak out against racism and conferred dominance. I have many times felt weary of

working on my own racial identity, fatigued by addressing Whiteness and White privilege, and profoundly inadequate in my ability or lack thereof to work across racial boundaries with women and men of color. I have frequently fantasized about ceasing my efforts to explore Whiteness as these efforts, more often than not, have left me feeling irrelevant, rejected (by both Whites and people of color), and foolish. When I have spoken of some of the ideas in this chapter, I have been met with blank stares, angry rebuttals, or obvious disinterest. I am acutely aware that my attempts to address Whiteness and White privilege are often blundering: blunt and strident, and sometimes, motivated more by wanting to be seen as a “good” White woman by people of color, rather than by an authentic desire to explore my race and its meaning. Indeed, I have at times overauthorized people of color in Group Relations conferences, automatically agreeing with all that they say, seeing their contributions as *ipso facto* more important than those of Whites, and working to implement their suggestions regardless of merit. In the Group Relations conference where a White female friend and colleague pointed out that I *really* authorize people of color, I now realize I was at times working hard to be a “good White girl” on diversity rather than genuinely collaborating across race.

I must acknowledge the times in my life when I have thought it better to hold on to my privilege, however unearned. And as a White woman, I can. I do not fear being shot in the street by a police officer, being denied a job based on my race, having my home vandalized, or my family attacked because of what I look like. I have White privilege. Yet, this privilege costs me too. It stifles my creativity and complexity and confines me to narrow, rigid, inauthentic, and unearned definitions of myself and my roles. The authority I have is not based on who I am, but rather on my White skin color. White women who acknowledge their femaleness and their Whiteness potentially bring more authenticity and passion to their work, love, and lives in general. Hence, they are harder for others to categorize, understand, and sometimes, appreciate. They may be the object of more envy and competition, and thus more vulnerable to attacks from others. Yet they may be more sure of their own authentic competence and true value irrespective of skin color, and hence, more resistant to others’ assaults.

So, where are the groups and systems that allow White women to be complicated and multidimensional, rather than one-dimensional figures containing stifling projections on everyone’s behalf? And, who are the White women who manage to bring themselves fully to groups and systems? They are the White female students in my class who take copious notes, sit in the front row, and engage me in thoughtful, informed, and challenging discussions. They are the White women who can weep when hurt or moved, yet whose tears do not dissolve them, but rather empower them to connect, act, or change. They are the White women who can name and reject White privilege and lead, empower, and join White men to do the same. They are the White women who denounce sexism while differentiating their experience of gender subjugation from that of women of color’s. They are fully themselves: strong, vulnerable, fearful, courageous, and dazzling White women.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

This chapter attempted to convey the interlocking nature of social identity groups by exploring the particular roles imparted to White women in groups and systems; roles White women collude in taking on, and which groups are invested in maintaining. Projective processes ensure this rigid role differentiation and as such ensure that each sub-group is always able to identify and name the “other.” That is, by seeking out a serviceable other (Morrison, 1992), each sub-group (e.g., White women, White men, men of color, women of color) has a handy repository for all they wish to disown. Yet, proponents of the Group Relations perspective would argue that the “other” is us. This suggests that relations among racial groups and racism involves everyone, both of color and White, and that each group contributes to the problem in their own particular way. Thus, changing the status quo would involve each group shifting, altering, and reclaiming disowned parts. There would undoubtedly be costs, the world would look different. But the potential outcome is that all social identity groups would have more freedom, creativity, authenticity, and personal authority and power, not based falsely on gender, skin color, privilege, or lack thereof, but rather on real skills and competence. Although, this may seem like an impossible ideal to achieve, members of all social identity groups might be able to work collaboratively across richly varied boundaries of difference. What would happen if White women, who are uniquely positioned to protect or disrupt the status quo, shifted? It might be that rather than each group fighting one another for scarce resources of power and authority such collaboration could produce an ample supply to be shared among all.

White Women—Protectors of the Status Quo; Positioned to Disrupt It

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