

Social Experiment Wolves in Social Justice Sheepskins: Defanging Inquisitional Variants of Whiteness Theory via Critical Realism

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Ethical protocols covering conventional educational research involving human participants assume that research can potentially harm; thus, prior review and approval is required to ensure the protection of the participants. Currently, theoretical research is not subject to these protocols. However, I argue that to the extent that the implementation of theoretical research in educational policy results in a social experiment, an ethical research protocol is warranted.¹ I believe that whiteness theory in-services and courses such as those referenced in Barbara Applebaum's "Social Justice Education, Moral Agency, and the Subject of Resistance" enact such social experiments, and that in these cases intellectually suspect theory guides ethically suspect practice. Using tools of analysis borrowed from critical realism, I show that much of what is suspect is discernible at the level of theory. The ethically suspect practices need not have occurred. An ethical research protocol was warranted.

I have two aims: first, to prove that whiteness theorists such as Applebaum (which I stipulate as "A-type") perform social experiments that should be subject to ethical research protocols, and these theoreticians therefore should consider the practical implications of their work; second, to show that A-type whiteness theory is ontologically and epistemically flawed, which yields ethically suspect practice. Specifically, A-type whiteness theory confuses knowledge with, and conflates it to, understanding, resulting in the mistaken depiction of the hermeneutic movement of understanding as the discursive strategy of a manifest social (sub)consciousness, named "whiteness," that resists disclosure in its role in the production and maintenance of unjust systemic marginalization. Concurrently, this involves a reduced conception of self and choice that views historicity as social programming.

This essay begins with a look at the nature and purpose of social science. A gloss on experiments is followed by a more detailed description of social experiments, their inception in Harry Garfinkel's ethnographic approach, their place in social science methodology, and their elements of usage that demand ethical consideration. A brief overview of A-type whiteness theory and practice fills out the ground upon which to adjudicate the question of whether or not they enact social experimentation. This raises the question of why this is a problem, and an ethical treatment of the question is given. Then a quick study of the hermeneutic model of understanding as a lens to view the philosophical claims of A-type whiteness theory sets up a comparative case study involving an experiment that employed an ethical research protocol, and one that did not. This fleshes out the ethics of social experimentation and suggests why an ethical protocol was in order. An examination of the philosophical underpinnings of such experimentation positions A-type whiteness theory

as enacting social experimentation, and when the hermeneutics of understanding is then applied, A-type whiteness theory is shown to lack explanatory adequacy, to be contradictory and inconsistent, and to generate spurious results. More specifically, A-type theorists claim to have uncovered the discursive strategies of whiteness, while I argue that these are no more than examples of the hermeneutic movement of understanding. Thus, the discursive strategies of whiteness are as much a chimera in theory as they are in practice.

Social science studies the social order to identify, describe, and explain social phenomena. For critical realists, to explain a social phenomenon is to identify and describe the reasons for, or causes of, its occurrence. Given that “scientifically significant generality does not lie on the face of the world, but in the hidden essence of things,” social science properly studies, apart from empirical categorizations, causal mechanisms.² That is, it aims to uncover the transfactual conditions and generative structures of social interaction. Social experiments are one means to uncover causal mechanisms. A quick examination of experiments, natural and social, follows.

An experiment, according to Roy Bhaskar, is “an attempt to trigger or unleash a single kind of mechanism or process in relative isolation, free from the interfering flux of the open world, so as to observe its detailed workings or record its characteristic mode of effect and/or to test some hypothesis about them.”³ The degree to which the experiment can create the isolation of a “closed system” determines its potential explanatory and predictive power. “The conditions for closure are first that the object possessing the power in question is stable (the intrinsic condition), and second that external conditions in which it is situated are constant (the extrinsic condition).”⁴

The social sciences are unable to replicate such closure because neither the objects of study, people and their institutions, nor their external surroundings, can be delimited so as to distill a single mechanism at work; this limits the explanatory and predictive power of the social sciences.⁵ Notwithstanding, a degree of closure can obtain when the object of study is the background of common understandings that make possible social communication.

“Overcoded” social situations, meaning very common, taken-for-granted situations involving quasi-ritualized behavior, are relatively closed, stable, and constant phenomena. Commonality minimizes the need for situational interpretation. For example, common greeting queries such as “How are you doing?” (in Canada or the United States) are met by competent social actors with similarly ritualized answers, such as “Fine. And you?” The purpose of such ritual interchanges is maintenance of the social order. Less-than-overcoded social situations require more interpretation, such as when a greeting query is used with someone outside the social group. Undercoded situations demand interpretation due to their novelty, such as when the person one addresses draws a weapon, or breaks into tears.⁶

Ethnomethodologists conduct social experiments in an attempt to trigger the hidden generative mechanisms of social interaction within overcoded social situations through the introduction of behavior different than what is commonly

expected, thus disrupting the underlying social mechanisms. In these experiments, people will try to “remedy” or “repair” the social order through various means, such as seeking clarification, treating the statement as a joke, or abandoning the situation.⁷ Garfinkel thus concludes that “To be able to interact adequately in different social situations it is necessary for participants to have access to methodological competence and common, taken-for-granted assumptions of the situation.” Significantly, a moral commitment is presupposed, and Garfinkel suggests “the possibility of common understanding does not consist in demonstrated measures of shared social structure, but consists instead and entirely in the enforceable character of actions in compliance with the expectancies of everyday life as a morality.”⁸

In critical realist methodology, social experiments are only used when experience, observation, and theorization, as manifest in counterfactuals and studies of pathological, extreme, or comparative case studies, are insufficient to disclose the generative mechanisms of social interaction.⁹ This is an ethical constraint necessitated by the disruption of the moral underpinnings that make interaction possible. Social experiments undermine the trust implicit in social understanding by intervening in the social competence of subjects, and Garfinkel’s studies clearly show that they dislike the experience. Further, it is normal for those who conduct social experiments to be discomforted by the situation.¹⁰ For these reasons, Berth Danermark and colleagues argue, social experiments require ethical research protocols.¹¹

Given this requirement, what remains is to determine if A-type whiteness theorists conduct social experiments. The study and extirpation of white racism is a focal concern of whiteness theory. It attempts to overcome systemic racism and other types of systemic injustice. For example, Kathy Hytten and Ameer Adkins argue that “studies of whiteness as institutionalized privilege and normalized status provide the substance of a critique that traces the roots of white dominance in society,” and that “a pedagogy of whiteness thus aims at exposing, studying, and disrupting the culture of power as the first step in conceptualizing educational and social practices that are empowering for all people.”¹²

A foundational assumption is “the idea that the power of whiteness works through its invisibility,” so A-type theorists work to make whiteness visible.¹³ As Hytten and Adkins assert, “whiteness must be studied, named, and marked so as to uproot it from its position of normativity and centrality.”¹⁴

A-type whiteness theorists allude to classes and in-services whose purpose is to make participants aware of their complicity in racism by making whiteness visible. One way this is accomplished is to claim the white participants are racists, regardless of the intent of their individual acts, because their day-to-day acts occur in a system of unjust societal enablements and constraints that invokes unjust privileges for them, and the system reiterates. Accordingly, membership in a systemically racist society necessarily makes whites beneficiaries of race-based privileges and, therefore, racists.¹⁵

When participants resist and reject a reconceptualization of the notion of racist that names them racist, this is viewed both as an example of the power of whiteness

to reinforce and reiterate itself and a site where whiteness can be encountered and subjected to “critical intervention.” Such resistance can be seen as whiteness personified.¹⁶ As Hytten and Adkins note, “These approaches go beyond merely describing the form of whiteness to using critique to disrupt and problematize its assumptions. Here whiteness... becomes, rather, something to be acted upon.”¹⁷

Applebaum asserts that the privileged students’ resistance to being named racist is evidence that “the self-same moral agency that educators draw upon to raise white students’ awareness of systemic oppression conspires to camouflage the very complicity one is attempting to make visible.” In other words, perceiving racism as a matter of intentionality hides one’s complicity in racism’s systemic manifestations. Specifically, it is said to hide an “unintentional and indirect” complicity in maintaining racist structures that is seated in one’s historicity and directs one’s intentions and choices, below the level of one’s awareness. Applebaum argues that “unintentional and indirect” complicity is complicity nonetheless. Those who do not transcend their historicity are guilty of culpable ignorance. She suggests that liberal notions of the self and moral agency need to be rethought so as to accord with these assertions. She argues against a strong conception of self and personal choice. Citing Judith Butler, she suggests it necessarily hides one’s social programming and its role in directing choice. This is taken to make it difficult to deconstruct and reconstruct that programming, so as to shape perceptions, and the consequent choices, in accord with whiteness theory’s ethical parameters.¹⁸

To summarize, whiteness theorists intend to study the nature of unjust privilege. They hold that the causal mechanisms of unjust privilege are hidden. They seek to identify and describe the reasons for, or causes of, its occurrence. Perceiving racism as a matter of intentionality is one of these causes. The purpose of whiteness theory is to identify, describe, explain, and overturn unjust privilege, which they name “whiteness.” Do they use social experiments to do so?

The use of an unconventional definition of racism to enable the participants to make visible their complicity in formerly invisible societal mechanisms reinscribing whiteness meets the definition of a social experiment. Further, the recognition of the power of the participants’ denials of complicity to maintain whiteness is the type of response that a social experiment seeks to evoke, to the extent it relates to using a perturbation to create a manifestation of hidden societal mechanisms. That whiteness theorists seek to disrupt these manifestations and mechanisms through critical scrutiny because they see whiteness as “something to be acted upon” reconfirms the point.

Some whiteness theorists, such as Sherry Marx and Julie Pennington, who I shall refer to as “B-type” whiteness theorists, know they are conducting social experiments and follow social experimentation ethical research protocols. They treat ethical considerations as paramount. Concerning their experiment, they state, “Honestly, we were nervous. Foremost in our minds were the goals of doing no harm and not making things worse. Consequently, we always proceeded with great caution.” Their work resonates with Garfinkel’s observations about the ethically

tenuous aspects of social experimentation. Marx and Pennington developed close relationships with the test subjects to create a safe and secure environment. Meeting this precondition, they dialogically disrupted their subjects' sense of self, disclosing how their historicity contained racial biases that influenced their perceptions of people of color. The results appear to be optimal. The students were able to confront and examine the prejudgments they brought into their interactions with people of color in an environment that withheld castigation and encouraged understanding. As the students equated being a good person with being nonracist, confronting their racially directed prejudgments gave them a means of becoming better people by modifying their prejudgments. Marx and Pennington conclude: "Rather than leave our students mired in White guilt, fear, or anger, we hope that we have left them with a critical perspective on the ways in which Whiteness and White racism influence them and American education, as well as a desire to change." Marx and Pennington saw themselves as educational midwives committed to aiding their students through a difficult labor.¹⁹

Clearly, whiteness theorists are conducting social experiments, or variations thereof. In fact, some are attempting social engineering, to the extent they are seeking to uproot whiteness through critical intervention. Given that they have laudable intentions and many educative experiences require a degree of discomforting disruption, why does it matter that whiteness theorists are conducting social experiments?

It matters in two ways. First, the potentially strongly discomforting nature of the disruptions imposed upon the test subjects are such that ethical protocols are necessitated. To reiterate, social experiments undermine the trust implicit in social understanding by treating the social competence of subjects as doubtful and questionable. When social experiments take place in classrooms, they undermine the trust implicit in classrooms. Second, social experiments should only take place if necessary.

I will show that the experiment was unnecessary for two reasons. First, much of what it delivered was readily available using alternate research methodologies. Second, the value of the research is dubious because it is based on spurious ontological and epistemic claims concerning the nature of knowledge, understanding, self, and society. I will begin with a brief overview of understanding, knowledge, their reflexive relation, the hermeneutic rule, and historicity, which will serve as a lens to clarify A-type whiteness theory's confusions.

Understanding is "the ability to have knowledge and thereby to comprehend, to discern, to judge, to interpret, to explain" or to theorize.²⁰ Understanding, being "the ability to have knowledge" is, therefore, one of the efficient causes of knowledge. Knowledge, as the product of understanding, can be thought of as "that which is learned," that is either "clear perception of what is regarded as fact, truth, or duty," or as "things had in consciousness (beliefs, ideas, facts, images, concepts, notions, opinions), that become justified in some way and are thereby regarded as true" or adequate.²¹

It is important to be clear about the intimate and reflexive relation between understanding and knowledge. Understanding is essentially the process by which, through the application of knowledge to experience, we develop and reinforce knowledge. Reflexively, understanding and knowledge adhere to the hermeneutic rule “that we must understand the whole in terms of the detail and the detail in terms of the whole.”²² Those who read the Christian Gospels gain an understanding of Christ’s character by reading the parables and gain an understanding of the parables by reading them through Christ’s character.

Understanding always begins within a particular temporal and cultural context: our historicity. Historicity, oversimplified, is our acculturation plus other experiences. We learn how to experience by experiencing, and our totality of experiences provides the frame (set of prejudgments) we apply to further experiencing.²³

The discourse of whiteness, in this sense, refers to any experiential modality (intentionality) that prehends manifestations of unjust racial privilege as acceptable. Decentering whiteness, as an educative project, involves modifying these modalities by and through the experiential application of alternate modalities that reframe experiences and their referent situation. For example, teaching someone who was raised as a slaver within a slave culture to reject slavery involves changing how that person experiences slaves. Having the person vicariously experience the lives of slaves so as to emphasize their humanity in a state of subjugation might be one of the tactics one would employ to change how s/he experienced enslaved people: their slavery was a product of circumstance, not essence.

Given this analysis, we can more thoroughly examine whiteness theory through its theory and practice, with an eye to its ontological and epistemic underpinnings.

Hyttén and John Warren aimed to disrupt whiteness to make it visible. Because they wanted to observe and categorize the different strategies whiteness is said to employ to reinforce and reiterate itself, they limited their teaching engagement. Prior relational development with the students was not initiated. Attempts by subjects to understand the problems of Whiteness and facilitate positive change were rebuffed. In their reflections, they note that their students are “self-absorbed,” or “they don’t understand the complexity of the problem.”²⁴ Hyttén and Warren were more interested in observing whiteness personified than they were in dialogically enabling their students to understand. They disrupted the sense of self of their students and, to some extent, left them “mired in White guilt, fear, or anger,” and uncertainty. To some extent, by privileging research interests over teaching interests, they violated the ethical compact that enables teacher-student relations.

Why do Hyttén and Warren pursue their particular approach, especially given their recognition of the ethically sensitive nature of the research? The impetus is concern over B-type whiteness theory’s lack of progress. Their students’ reactions to the subject matter and its presentation suggested the problem of whiteness was deeper and “greater than they thought.” They concluded, “We needed to see the ways whiteness persists even as they/we move toward understanding the complexities of racism.” Recalling Michel Foucault, their reinterpretation of the problem suggested

power was not so much located in privileged individuals as it was taken up throughout the community and manifest in discourses that reinforce whiteness. This necessitated a shift in focus to the students and their discourses and away from systemic manifestations of privilege. Disrupting whiteness became synonymous with disrupting self. In this sense, whiteness is not merely conceptual. It has a substantive manifestation: its discourse. Scrutinizing the discourse, they noted tendencies that shifted the focus of the discussion away from students' critical self-examination of racist complicity and toward their feelings, and those feelings' relations with the views and actions of others, progressive actions, and barriers to progressive action.²⁵

Hyttén and Warren identify twelve discursive forms of engagement whiteness is said to strategically employ to recenter and reiterate itself. These forms fall under four categories of appeals: (a) to self, (b) to progress, (c) to authenticity, and (d) to extremes. Importantly, they argue, if appropriate tactics are deployed, these forms of engagement are also the means to decenter and dissolve whiteness. Informing Applebaum, they note, "The difficulty of this work is that often students' usage of these engagements accomplishes both; that is, they often walk the fine line between productivity and resistance."²⁶

This view is mistaken on two counts. First, what Hyttén and Warren identify as the discursive strategies of whiteness are merely examples of the hermeneutic movement of understanding, guided by aspects of a whiteness-oriented epistemology, which is the dynamic product of the students' historicity. Second, their reconceptualization of racism is flawed. Student resistance to this redeption, and its consequent defamatory name calling, was warranted. These points will be demonstrated through the earlier afforded axiom that we learn how and what to experience in a referent by experiencing the referent through that how and what. The referent is the arbiter of what and how it can be experienced. Hyttén and Warren's description of the discursive strategies, that is, the referent, is demonstrative of the inadequacy of their depiction:

In appeals to self students foreground their own feelings, emotions, experiences and perceptions as they try both to make sense of the experiences of nonwhite others and to come to terms with their own whiteness. They do this through drawing comparisons with the experiences of others, dwelling on their own feelings of guilt, and distinguishing themselves from more racist friends and family. Appeals to progress involve pushing for immediate actions and solutions, reflecting on the progress that this society has already made in relation to race issues, and focusing on one's own self-enrichment as a form of progress. When students appeal to authenticity, they call on the "authentic" experience of nonwhite others, cite scholarly authorities, and/or focus on the fact that while they understand the whiteness literature cognitively, it does not match up with how they experience the world. In appealing to extremes, students set up problematic binaries. For example, they contrast the "ideal" world we envision in the classroom with the "real world," where problems are too big to confront meaningfully. The other extremes they cite are between a culture of niceness and the need for conflict, and between silence and engagement.²⁷

This description of the discourses shows the disruption of self was effective. Hyttén and Warren's students are endeavoring to understand and act upon their whiteness and the whiteness of others. They are engaging their historicity with their newly

acquired readings to reframe their interpretations both of their societal relations and of who they are.

What A-type theorists mistakenly view as whiteness's resistance to change is simply a feature of the inertia of historicity, likely reinforced within people's nested communities while being redirected by communities sensitive to whiteness. Resistance to the alternate interpretation is simply an aspect of the dynamic of critical engagement. In effect, whiteness theorists bring about a competition between worldviews. The competition is required, because the original worldview has adequacy. Their task is to demonstrate its inadequacies. Given that the burden of proof falls upon the accuser, it is hardly surprising that telling people their way of seeing the world is wrong, which is intimately connected with who they are, should meet resistance. This is attested to by volumes of literature on paradigm shifts, incommensurability, and brainwashing. That is, whiteness does not have strategies of resistance; it is simply a learned way of perceiving. It has inertia.

Humans as social beings have strategies they employ to make both community and communication possible. The tendency of class discussions to move away from critical self-examinations is at least partially a manifestation of the dynamic that makes social interaction possible. Following Garfinkel, given that disrupting the self is effectively treating a subject's social competence as doubtful and questionable, then for discussion to occur it is necessary to remedy and repair the social situation by affirming the subject's social competence. Rather than a strategy to recenter whiteness, it is a tactic to restore the possibility of social interaction. This being so, Hytten and Warren's attempts to pin down whiteness amount to preventing the remedy and repair of both their students' sense of social competency and the social situation in the classroom.

The view that the discourses that recenter whiteness are also the means to decenter whiteness is correct, merely misdescribed. Given that one's historicity generates an epistemology of whiteness, the only way to decenter whiteness is by applying upon it an alternate epistemology. When the students bring their historicity to bear on the alternate epistemology, reflexively they are also bringing the alternate epistemology to bear on their historicity.

This undermines the claim that perceiving racism as a matter of intentionality hides one's complicity in its systemic manifestations. It is wrong in at least two ways. First, if it were true, systemic manifestations of racism could not be perceived. Our intentional states bracket what we can know. Second, the claim recapitulated amounts to, "We must work on transforming your intentional state so that you can see both your complicity in systemic racism and that your notion that racism is a matter of intentionality not only hides your complicity in its systemic manifestations, it makes you systemically complicit." This claim involves a performative contradiction. In fact, the foundational assumption of the practice of whiteness theory can be phrased as "Racism, in both its individual and systemic forms, is a matter of intentionality because it is the product of networks of intentionalities." Whiteness theorists aim to transform the nodes so as to transform the system. Thus, contrary to Applebaum's deduction, there is no need to rethink our conception of the

self and moral agency. The premise, “the self-same moral agency that educators draw upon to raise White students’ awareness of systemic oppression conspires to camouflage the very complicity one is attempting to make visible,” is false.²⁸

To summarize, what Hytten and Warren identify as the discursive strategies of whiteness are merely examples of the hermeneutic movement of understanding, guided by aspects of a whiteness-oriented epistemology, which is the dynamic product of their students’ historicity. Student resistance to their introduction to and engagement with the paradigm of whiteness theory is a feature of the dynamic of critical engagement involved in paradigm comparison and integration. The tendency of class discussion to move from critical self-examination is partially a manifestation of the dynamic that makes social interaction possible, namely the affirmation of subjects’ social competence. Perceiving racism as a matter of intentionality does not hide one’s complicity in its systemic manifestations. Rather, it is the only way to uncover complicity. It is wrong to conclude, therefore, that “the self-same moral agency that educators draw upon to raise white students awareness of systemic oppression conspires to camouflage the very complicity one is attempting to make visible.” Consequently, there is no need to rethink our conception of self and moral agency. Further, given that all of the critical realist tools used in this essay were available prior to Hytten and Warren enacting their social experiment, there was no reason for it to take place. The ethically suspect actions need not have occurred. An ethical research protocol should have been employed.

1. Berth Danermark et al., *Explaining Society: Critical Realism in the Social Sciences* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

2. *Ibid.*, 77.

3. Andrew Collier, *Critical Realism: An Introduction to Roy Bhaskar’s Philosophy* (New York: Verso, 1994), 3.

4. Andrew Sayer, *Realism and Social Science* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 2000), 14–5.

5. Contrary to Aristotle, see *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Martin Oswald (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1962), 5.

6. Danermark et al., *Explaining Society*, 93.

7. *Ibid.*, 101–4.

8. Harold Garfinkel, *Studies in Ethnomethodology* (Malden, Mass.: Polity, 1967), 41–2 and 53.

9. Danermark et al., *Explaining Society*, 103.

10. Garfinkel, *Studies in Ethnomethodology*, 44–75.

11. Danermark et al., *Explaining Society*, 103.

12. Kathy Hytten and Ameer Adkins, “Thinking Through a Pedagogy of Whiteness,” *Educational Theory* 51, no. 4 (2001): 439 and 437.

13. Barbara Applebaum, “Social Justice Education, Moral Agency, and the Subject of Resistance,” *Educational Theory* 54, no. 1 (2004): 59–60.

14. Hytten and Adkins, “Thinking Through a Pedagogy of Whiteness.”

15. Applebaum, “Social Justice Education,” 59.

16. Neither whiteness nor its subjects want to be named as such.

17. Hytten and Adkins, "Thinking Through a Pedagogy of Whiteness," 445 and 439.
18. Applebaum, "Social Justice Education," 60, 60–72, 60–3, and 60–2.
19. Sherry Marx and Julie Pennington, "Pedagogies of Critical Race Theory: Experimentations with White Preservice Teachers," *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 16, no. 1 (2003): 94–5.
20. Peter Angeles, *Dictionary of Philosophy* (New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 1981), 301.
21. *Ibid.*, 142.
22. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 259.
23. *Ibid.*, 276 and 267.
24. Kathy Hytten and John Warren, "Engaging Whiteness: How Racial Power Gets Reified in Education," *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 16, no. 1 (2003): 70–86.
25. *Ibid.*, 65–7.
26. *Ibid.*, 70.
27. *Ibid.*
28. Applebaum, "Social Justice Education," 60.