

## Deconstructing white privilege through intercultural education

## Decostruire il “privilegio bianco” attraverso l’educazione interculturale

Marta Milani

Postdoctoral fellow | Department of Human Sciences | University of Verona (Italy) | marta.milani@univr.it

abstract

From the age of exploration, when Europeans set off in search of new lands and profits, to the era of Western capitalism, white privilege has been dominant across the globe. The prevalence of whiteness and white privilege work to maintain and perpetuate the powerless position of black and minority ethnic groups and therefore systems and structures are designed to do this. This article, covering concepts such as whiteness and white privilege and the procedures they operate to marginalise and exclude some groups over others, highlights the importance of challenging racism, exclusion and inequalities through the implementation of intercultural education.

**Keywords:** White privilege, Intercultural education, Social justice, Racism, Inclusion

Sin dall’epoca delle esplorazioni, quando gli Europei partirono alla ricerca di nuove terre e profitti, per arrivare all’attuale era del capitalismo occidentale, il colore bianco ha dominato in tutto il mondo. Il suprematismo bianco – e il privilegio ad esso associato – ha cioè operato per mantenere (e perpetuare) in una posizione di inferiorità e scervera da potere alcuno i neri e le minoranze etniche, attraverso sistemi e strutture appositamente pensati per far ciò. Il presente articolo, movendo dai concetti di “whiteness” e “suprematismo bianco” e dalle modalità attraverso cui essi agiscono per marginalizzare ed escludere alcuni gruppi rispetto ad altri, rimarca l’importanza di sfidare razzismi e disuguaglianze mediante l’implementazione dell’educazione interculturale.

**Parole chiave:** Suprematismo bianco, Educazione interculturale, Giustizia sociale, Razzismo, Inclusione

## Introduction

When, in 1903, Du Bois published his collection called “*The Souls of Black Folk*”, two metaphorical elements were prophetically picked out that would be characteristic of the way the African diaspora is perceived in the United States and more generally in the Western world: the “double consciousness” and the “color-line”. The latter referred to the constant gap that separated the opportunities and life prospects of white people from those of black people, a carriage entrance which was the starting point of a particular feeling identified as the so-called “Twoness”, that the Author (1994, p. 2) describes as

[...] this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels this twoness, – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

The two images merge to create what he refers to as “double consciousness” – which is simultaneously psychological and social – , which leads – in a seamless shift between the two components – to the forging of the idea that Afro-Americans have of themselves: “In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. [...] He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face” (Du Bois, 1994, pp. 2-3).

In reality, far from being single or double, as wished for by Du Bois, today scholars are almost unanimously in agreement in conceiving the identity as being multi-faceted, eclectic and, above all, subjected to continuous adjustments and clarifications, in a long and tortuous process that winds its way throughout the course of existence (Fiorucci, Pinto Minerva, Portera, 2017; Catarci, Macinai, 2015; Zoletto, 2012; Holliday, 2011).

This multiple identity thus represents the cure and solution and no longer the problem. Nevertheless, even if more than a century has gone by since this work was published, one only needs to take a look at any digital platform to understand that ethnic discrimination is still a highly re-

levant issue not only in the United States, but everywhere and so much so that Alibhai-Brown (2018, p. XIII): was led to pose the question: “Are such human behaviours and inequalities an unavoidable part of all social configurations?” and then to add, immediately after, the statement of the in-depth reasons for this obstinate existence: “Or should they be thought of as by-products of certain economic systems, histories, beliefs, distortions and competitiveness?” (*ibidem*).

The question posed by the Author enters into the heated debate that is still in progress in the field of science, involving various disciplines including intercultural education, cognitive sciences, neuroscience, evolutionist psychology – just to mention a few – and that sees scholars exchanging views on the age-old issue of the relationship between nature and nurture, wondering whether, and to what extent, the cultural categories and different perceptions of the world that each individual bears with them, are determined biologically and culturally and with what level of awareness people are the active or passive replicators of this.

It is a sensitive topic from a political and moral point of view, as pointed out by Pinker (2002), but also educational, since the prevalence of one theory over another may lead one to justify situations of inequality, oppression and discrimination as being unavoidable and even to negate the possibility of emancipation and to accept with resignation certain determinist positions on human nature.

What emerges from recent developments in the study of cognitive processes and, above all, thanks to the contribution from neuroscience is that certain character traits are effectively transmittable genetically as they are evolutionary adaptations implemented in cerebral processes (therefore, substantially, faculties that are mainly biological) (Nguyen-Phuong-Mai, 2017; Gazzaniga, 2011; Pinker, 2002), but the role and weight of the social environment (*e.g.* unequal opportunities, wealth, policies that do not treat people as individuals with rights, etc.) continues to play a determining role in the formation of the individual and their complex human traits<sup>1</sup>. Consequently, establishing education in terms of intercultural education for social justice is an essential element that cannot be sidestep-

1 The gene-culture interaction model posits that the same gene can indeed lead to opposite cultural behaviors because genes support cultural adaptation. For further in-depth reading, see Nguyen-Phuong-Mai (2017) and Chiao and Blizinsky (2009).

ped, especially nowadays in a society where inequalities based on ethnic origin, social class, gender, [...], still exist (Vaccarelli, 2017; Tarozzi, 2015; Gorski, Pothini, 2014; Rivera, 2010; Coulby, 2006). This article, covering concepts such as whiteness and white privilege and the procedures they operate to marginalise and exclude some groups over others, highlights the importance of challenging racism, exclusion and inequality through the implementation of intercultural education.

## 1. Whiteness and White Privilege

Prior to the 20th century, the term “white privilege” was used in the United States to address structural advantages given to Whites, such as ownership of property and rights to citizenship (Bennett, Driver, Trent, 2019). It was moreover, thanks to McIntosh (1988) that the present-day understanding of the term as a way to inform people of the ways in which being White can make life easier, on average, than being a Person of Color.

Now, a number of scholars frame this concept within the body of historic-structural benefits resulting in psychological, social, economic, etc. advantages that create different lived experiences for Whites and minoritized populations<sup>2</sup>: Sue (2003, p. 138) describes it as the

unearned benefits and advantages that are handed out to white people as a result of a system that is normed and standardized on White [...] values, with most of the structures, policies and practices of the institutions being situated in such a manner as to pave the road for white individuals while creating obstacles for other groups.

- 2 An overriding example concerns the barriers to global mobility, namely the fact that certain passports include a certain privilege. The picture that emerges from the passport index of Henley & Partners' (H&P) ([www.henleypassportindex.com](http://www.henleypassportindex.com)), one of the most commonly used tools to measure the freedom of movement enjoyed by citizens of a certain country, provides evidence of an unbalanced, indefensible and fundamentally racist system, in which ethnic origins and citizenship represent the strongest currency in terms of the possibility for movement. In this sense, Western passports are at the top of all rankings, whereas it is a complex matter for Africans to travel within and outside their continent.

Whereas, according to Leonardo (2009) white privilege manifests itself through people's actions and existing structural procedures and it is maintained – and often obscured – through with the individuals' rationalisations in using broad (often racist) categorisations of people of colour and a lack of cultural sensitivity.

The disadvantaged positions that those from black and minority ethnic backgrounds find themselves in are at all levels of society (Bhopal, 2018) and, most importantly, as pointed out by Bell (1991; 1992), who developed the concept of “racial realism”, the traditional messages of meritocratic lessons such as hard work equating to success do not often coincide with the actual lived experiences of minoritized populations:

- black and minority ethnic groups are less likely to have the same opportunities as white groups in their access to elite universities; in the US, for instance, black African American people are more likely to attend underfunded public schools (NCES, 2016) and when they enter the labour market they are further disadvantaged. In fact, getting a good job is often dependent on access to social connections which enable links to be made and in turn lead to introductions and job offers; many black and minority ethnic families may not have access to such contacts and financial resources to promote their childrens' best interests, for example by securing and finding unpaid internships that lead to future lucrative employment (Bhopal, 2018; Zwysen, Longhi, 2016). In this regard, Li's research (2015, p. 26) suggests that, even when black and minority ethnic groups have similar levels of educational attainment, this doesn't result in equal outcomes in the labor market: “In spite of their higher qualifications, ethnic minorities, particularly black people and Muslims encounter dual disadvantages, firstly in employment and then, when in work, in gaining career advancement”;
- the abovementioned inequalities have a cumulative effect on why some ethnic groups end up living in socially deprived areas. Catney and Sabater (2015) have referred to this as a “spatial mismatch” between job supply and job demand and the long-term impact of such a thing suggests that the links among poverty, ethnicity and location may result in the segregation of different communities (Bhopal, 2018; Lalani *et alii*, 2014; Portera, 2006);
- tax laws and policies are often designed to keep the poor out of we-

althier districts: “[...] we are witnessing a nationwide return of concentrated poverty that is racial in nature and that this expansion and continued existence of high poverty ghettos and barrios is no accident. These neighbourhoods are not the value free outcome of the impartial workings of the housing market. Rather, in large measure, they are the inevitable and predictable consequences of deliberate policy choices” (Jargowsky, 2015, p. 2);

- all of these factors have knock-on effects on future life chances available to them.

White privilege is, ultimately, the expression of whiteness through the maintenance of power, where the word whiteness relates to “a paradigm, a way of understanding the social world in which white is a position of relative privilege, albeit highly uneven, contingent and situational” (Garner, 2012, p. 5). There are, in fact, divisions and hierarchies within the classification of whiteness which create further divisions based on other marks such as class, gender, education levels, accent, dress, age, religion, among others (*e.g.* the whiteness attributed to Gypsies, Roma and Travellers is a form of “non-acceptable” whiteness, which does not have the same privilege accorded to those from white middle-class backgrounds). The result of this is the formation of a subjectivity, forced to “look at oneself through the eyes of others” (Du Bois, 1994, p. 7) or, as Fanon (2008, p. 102) would echo half a century later, “Already white looks, the truly real ones, dissect me”, locked and frozen by the impossibility of acknowledgement. The anomaly in the process of constituting subjectivity thus takes its moves from devices crossed by the violence of domination and exploitation, in which the Other becomes reified, emptied of all human substance. This mechanism brings the individual to experience a situation of alienation (with respect to himself/herself and the surrounding reality), negating the relationship dimension, the cornerstone of identity (Bossio, 2017; 2013; Portera, 2013; Levinas, 1971) as well as the topical point of intercultural education.

## 2. Building a “Third Space”

The problematic nature of multicultural approach, according to Apitzsch (1993, p. 137), is that “it seems to consist not only in its defining the

main differences in society in cultural terms; but also through the fact that it is liable to underestimate those social forces that distinguish not only between cultures but create [...] domination, coercion and subordination, disguised behind the label of culture or ‘ethnicity’”.

Contemporary multiculturalism has indeed clearly failed to change many of its hegemonic practices since it appears to focus on a peaceful coexistence of cultures (Portera, Grant, 2011), without asking questions about power relations, equity, human right issues, and the harmonising of material and cultural resources (Moodley, 2011).

In attempting to address this problematic, a critique of multiculturalism is not sufficient, but a replacing of it beyond the current categories that constitute itself is paramount, for example, the possibilities of a “third space”, as originally defined by Bhabha (1994). This last one, a central concept in the logic of the intercultural approach (Milani, 2017; Portera, 2013; Zoletto, 2012; Agostinetti, 2009), focuses on identity as an ongoing process of translation and negotiation, which is taking place beyond and in-between two or more cultures, languages and geographies.

The moment of identification in the dialectic relationship between the Self and the Other is of paramount importance; it impacts and guides the shape, the form and the intensity of the ways in which the Self translates the Other and vice versa. In this sense, the question posed by Bhabha (1994) clearly defines the terms of the issue: how an African refugee/immigrant would be interpellated in the mirror of society? The social imaginary is in fact directly implicated in how and with whom Blacks identify, which in turn influences what they linguistically and culturally learn and how they learn it as well as how they go about negotiating their identity formation and the spaces they eventually occupy. In other words, Blacks and any other minority ethnic groups find themselves in what Ibrahim (2014, p. 51) calls “a racially conscious society that ‘asks’ them to fit somewhere where it is their racial identity that influences, if not determines, their answerability”.

Therefore, conceived against the discursive space where they are already imagined, constructed and treated as “Blacks” by hegemonic groups, the “third space” must be seen as a semiotic space, fluid, shifting over time in accordance with contextual influences, such as sociopolitical realities, economic possibilities, developmental transitions, personality variables and cultural histories. Precisely through communicative and dialogic in-

teraction with the Others and the surrounding environment (taken in its widest sense), that complex series of dynamics, which reveals subjectivity, begins to take shape; with its syncopated timing, its fractures – and sometimes breakages – that cross it but that can open it up to transformation.

To become “Black” is not without its discursive politics of resistance and in this sense language, values, habits, traditions etc. become markers of desire and investment; an invocation of political, ethnic and historical space. Hall and du Gay (2001) refer to this process of identity formation as the “New Identity”, which they distinguish from the “Old Identity”. This last one is an expression of a sort of “Cartesian stable” self where the person is situated within essentialized, thetic and static discourses of history, self and memory; whereas the “New Identity” discourse is conceived more complexly and, most importantly, it takes into account how bodies are read socially, politically and historically<sup>3</sup>.

So now the question is: how can we move forward in a society that keeps to reinforce inequality? Significant changes are needed in order to address and challenge white privilege starting from intercultural education and social justice.

### 3. Intercultural Education and Social Justice as a Response to White Privilege

Racism, said Fanon (2008, p. 53), “is not a constant of the human mind: it is a historical system of domination that can be materially destroyed”. For any meaningful change to be effective, questions of power and agency must be addressed given that “trasformation of systems of oppression must take place on multiple levels, including institutional, societal, interpersonal, and intrapersonal” (Bullock, Freedman, 2006, p. 148). Agency refers to the conscious role that we chose to play in helping to bring about change for the benefit of all and especially for those who occupy disadvantaged positions and it starts with acknowledging the importance of personal attitudes and beliefs toward white privilege. For example, re-

3 Borrowing from a concept first suggested by Deleuze and Guattari (1987), power can be seen as a root system that has no main or central root, that propagates itself in a fragmented, discontinuous, multidirectional way and, most importantly, it is everywhere, invisible, pervasive and employed through a net-like organization.

cent work found that knowing about white privilege can lead White people to become defensive and emphasize their own experiences of hardship (Phillips, Lowery, 2015); such a response may reflect White people's motivation to maintain their privileged status (Phillips, Lowery, 2018) or to avoid the threatening possibility that their success is bolstered by systems of inequality (Cooley, Brown-Iannuzzi, Cottrell, 2019; Carter, Murphy, 2015). For this reason, inequities need to be addressed both at the individual and at a structural, policy level, paying attention to the holistic and systemic nature of oppression.

People should not merely aim to change perspective and/or perceptions through critical personal reflection (Milani, 2017; 2015) but work to create reforms within communities through the so-called policy of positive or affirmative actions, that is specific legislative provisions aimed at promoting the emancipation of ethnic minorities, by providing them with quotas and opportunities, starting from the field of education<sup>4</sup>. These efforts must be recursive, longitudinal, collective, and community based according to a logic which sees local commitment and action as an essential starting point: “translating national strategies into action at local level is in an early phase and needs to be supported with sustainable funding, capacity building and full involvement of local authorities and civil society, and robust monitoring to bring about the much-needed tangible impact at local level, where challenges arise” (Bhopal, 2018, p. 36).

Particularly, such efforts must centre around intercultural education; which in turn needs to be founded upon an approach to social justice that constitutes the necessary premise and theoretical framework for a meeting of people based on reciprocal recognition and fairness (Portera, 2013; Tarozzi, 2012; Gorski, 2008). That is to say that establishing intercultural education in terms of education for social justice would thus allow one to avoid the traps of vague, superficial exoticism – the as-yet-unappealed legacy of the multicultural approach<sup>5</sup> – and its limited con-

4 Along with systemic reforms, white teachers and educators should also provide themselves with tools such as training in collective action, readings on nonviolent protest strategies, and negotiation techniques – just to mention a few – to become social agents of change in the fight against structural racism.

5 For further in-depth clarification on the differences between the intercultural and multicultural approaches, see Catarci, Macinai (2015), Portera (2013; 2006), Fiorucci (2011), Pinto Minerva (2002).

cept of equality, posing the question of fairness as the ethical background for the positive management of cultural differences.

Whereas multiculturalism aims to discover and tolerate people from different cultures, who live peacefully side by side, the prefix “inter” implies relationships, interaction, and exchange. Intercultural education rejects immobility and hierarchy; it aims to encourage dialog and relationships on equal terms, so that one does not feel forced to sacrifice important aspects of one’s cultural identity. It is based on a direct exchange of ideas, principles, and behaviours, a comparison of concepts and mutual discovery (Portera, Grant, 2017).

Today, more than ever before, it is essential to propose alternative stories that demolish the one-sided constructions and narratives (Mezzadra, 2010; Adichie, 2009), produced by just one kind of interpretation – that is, the interpretation of the Whites – and to create a new epistemology which cuts the noose and rewrites the plot from the past so as to build a positive future not only for the African diaspora, but for all migrants. As Fanon (2008, p. 176) said some time ago in the famous conclusion to his work “Black Skin, White Masks”, the Black man wants to rid himself of his past condition as a slave, and of the “epidermisation” of his inferiority complex: “In no way should I dedicate myself to the revival of an unjustly unrecognized Negro civilization. I will not make myself the man of any past. I do not want to exalt the past at the expense of my present and of my future”.

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