

My theories of understanding

I initially wrote three essays for my theories of understanding that were poorly related to my theories of understanding. As my project shifted focus, I realized I needed to write something more personal, and deeply reflective of the lenses that shape this work. Thus, I wrote a vignette about my hometown's production of the "Kansas Nutcracker" last fall. Below I use this vignette to explicate my three theories of understanding: theory of identity (my identity), theory of social inequality (how I see the world), and theory of change (how I see change).

Vignette

Every time I hear "The Nutcracker: Overture" I'm instantly transported to a Friday evening in early December 2009. If I close my eyes hard enough, I can remember the mildly nauseating smell of Suave Max Hold Hairspray, with a hint of body odor, and the faintest whiff of sugar cookies. I can almost feel the warmth of the stage lights on my skin again.

I performed in my hometown's annual performance of "A Kansas Nutcracker" as a child before I could read or write. The show is a celebration of Kansas' history as a Free State and plays a huge role in the community. The first half of the show is a mix of ballet and a detailing the history of the 'Border Ruffians' and John Brown.



Me, in 2009 in costume to perform in the "Kansas Nutcracker"

The play represented an unspoken sense of pride that we were on the ‘right’ side of history because we were a “Freestate”. There was an enormous amount of pride in my state history growing up. I vividly remember my mother telling me with emphatic pride to me “you grew up in a *free* state”. In high school, I went on history walking tours of my hometown for fun. I loved history and I was proud of where I grew up. In middle school, I starred in a play entitled ‘*The Complete History of Kansas in Sixty Minutes*’. I participated in National History Day, a national competition where students create multidimensional history presentations. I was incredibly confident in my historical knowledge of my hometown.

In constructing my praxis – which eventually led to my unpacking and exploring systemic racism in the community I grew up in – I learned that just a block from where I grew up celebrating my state’s history, was the unmarked grave of three black men (Pete Vinegar, Isaac King, and George Robertson) who were lynched off of a bridge that I walked across almost weekly in the 18 years that I lived in Lawrence. Not once had I ever learned about their murders. The realization that I had misunderstood the world around me changed a focal point of my identity and my view of social systems.

My identity

When I close my eyes and remember being at the rehearsals, I now think a little more critically than I did at nine years old. Most of the other dancers around me were all white. Most of the actors, directors, and stage crew were also white. Most of the dancers and performers looked like me. Many went to the same private elementary school that I attended, and their parents’ owned homes in the same neighborhood that my parents did. Almost all the kids had a stay-at-home parent. My identity is shaped by significant privileges.

It wasn't until I was constructing my praxis in the fall of my senior year of college (17 years after I first performed in production as a grasshopper in 2005) that I realized the blaring irony between the cast and the intention of the performance. To me, this represents the background I bring to the table in my thesis work. I see so many parallels between being in the cast of the Kansas Nutcracker and being a mentor with AKOG. In both cases, groups of people predominantly white and other privileged identities were working closely with race, while having little to no conversations about what that truly meant.

Realizing that a reality I had understood to be true was not, forced me to deconstruct many of my subconscious assumptions about the world and question my beliefs. I stumbled upon a quote by Ibram X. Kendi that shaped how I viewed my identity. They wrote "no one becomes 'not racist,' despite a tendency by Americans to identify themselves that way. We can only strive to be 'antiracist' daily, to continually rededicate ourselves to the lifelong task of overcoming our country's racist heritage" (The New York Times, 2019). From this, I worked to deconstruct my identity – to consider the harm I may have caused by embracing the mindset of 'not being racist' rather than that of antiracism. It has been a long and incredibly uncomfortable process, but one that I believe to now be a focal point of my identity.

How I see the world

In processing this information, I started to make personal sense of the way that systemic racism manifests itself in every aspect of society. It made me wonder how much of what I had been taught about the world was shaped through similar lenses. I began to realize how every narrative of power likely is shaped through the lens of oppressors. I began to question everything about knowledge and power. What did it mean if the only people calling it a "Free State" were

white and privileged? What was ‘free’ about white people controlling history’s narrative? How could it be a ‘Freestate’ on stolen land? What does it mean that the biggest celebration of Kansas history took place less than a few minutes' walk from the bridge where three innocent people were murdered and never acknowledged it?

The “Freestate Mentality” is a term I use to make sense of the idea that racial inequality doesn’t exist in places where slavery was outlawed before the 13th amendment (i.e., New England, and Kansas). The ideology suggests that racism exists within individuals in politically liberal and/or historically Free States on a rare individual level (like a bad apple) and by contrast depicts the south as having racism deeply embedded into all people, systems, and structures (bad tree). It’s a tactic¹ that I believe is used to absolve individuals from confronting the level to which they may inadvertently participate in and benefit from institutional racism. I believe this to be true because I have fallen into this mindset myself and have spent the past year and a half deconstructing it.

Through this lens, I frame inequality as a form of oppression that manifests itself in every major part of society. It impacts individuals with different identities uniquely. I believe ignorance and lack of awareness of inequality amongst those with privileged identities contribute to inequality, but that inaction is the perpetrating force. I draw on the work of Paulo Freire in his book *“The Politics of Education: Culture, Power, and Liberation”*. He writes “washing one's hands of the conflict between the powerful and the powerless means to side with the powerful, not to be neutral” (p. 122). Through this, I frame inequality through the lens of responsibility. Those who hold privileged identities are responsible for combatting inequality and for listening to those who are oppressed without expectation of personal benefit.

¹ Also known as a distancing device

How I see change

My theory of change comes directly from my lived experience as a white woman who feels that she was not adequately educated on racial history – past and present. I have experienced changes in how I navigate the world after researching systemic racism in my community. This gives me hope that perhaps others may experience this through their participation as well. Even if all that comes of this work is my own deepened understanding of systemic racism and underreported racial injustice, I believe that this will be meaningful change work.

This leads me to frame my theory of change through the following quote from Paulo Freire, “education does not change the world, education changes people. People change the world”. This work will not change the world. My praxis will seek to discuss systemic racism. I hope that the people I work with during this project walk away from it more educated about systemic racism than they were before. The change that may come from this work will be closely interlinked with the lives and experiences of the individuals who engage in it.

References:

Paulo Freire (1985). “The Politics of Education: Culture, Power, and Liberation”, p.122, Greenwood Publishing Group