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Challenging Whiteness in Higher Education Classrooms: Context, Content, and Classroom Dynamics

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INTRODUCTION

Educators have, in their position, the ability to facilitate shifts in consciousness. They are given a unique platform from which to harbor constructive learning that is conducive to affect deep structural transformations in thought. When inspired by a sense of hope for social justice, educators may seek to invoke these shifts through pedagogical techniques that unveil the hidden relations of power that play out in society. Race and racism are potent forces in American society and sensitive topics for the everyday actor. Though class, gender, religion, age, ability, and sexual orientation intersects race to affect life chances, simply having 'white' skin has its advantages. Whiteness is much more than a skin color and those categorized as such are not a homogeneous group. The concept of 'white', and the privilege afforded it, is something many students of this era have not seen or heard before. The purpose of this study was to compile the most common challenges educators experience when introducing whiteness to students in predominantly white higher education environments and to provide practitioners with the most effective classroom pedagogical methods to help students grapple with the concepts of racial privilege and their own identity.

Whiteness, White Privilege and Visibility

Researchers' concepts of whiteness and white privilege vary, but there are some consistent ideas and themes. Elaine Manglitz (2003) conducted a comprehensive review of the literature on these concepts and found that many researchers do agree that whiteness is an ever changing social construction, not a static category, Researchers also commonly link whiteness to relations of dominance and certain practices that are unnamed. White privilege is distinct in that it refers to the benefits received by those possessing whiteness (Manglitz 2003). Specifically, "Whiteness is a location of structural advantage…a standpoint from which to view society…and a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed" (Frankenberg 1993:1). Also, race scholars concerned with power such as Peggy Mcintosh (1989) and Kathy Hytten and Amee Adkins (2001) maintain that this category of whiteness is accomplished through discourse. There is a communication of whiteness that is hidden in color-blind ideology (Bonilla-Silva 2002, Bobo 2011).

White privilege refers to the advantages afforded white skin, however these benefits can be clouded by one's class position. Being wealthy and white brings much more opportunities than just being white. Paula Rothenberg (2012) states, in her introduction to the edited volume *White Privilege*, "deprivations and inequities imposed by class, may be so overwhelming that they mask the privileges some receive by virtue of being white" (2012:3). This distinction is an important one, particularly when teaching in the midst of white working class students who are less familiar with the more obvious class privileges. Students are

likely to be offended at these foreign concepts of privilege given their economic lot in life. A goal for teachers wishing to bring this topic into their class, should be to make the white racial category visible and to open up meaningful discussion about the privileges afforded that characteristic; this includes how class position intersects with whiteness.

The structural impositions of the conditions of racism remain hidden to those who benefit from this design. Though scholars differ on the concept of whiteness, there is little reason to hold off classroom discussion on this issue. An exact definition is hardly necessary to begin dialogue that brings to light the racialization of all of humanity and points out benefits and disadvantages experienced based on those racial categorizations. White is a racial category, like black, and a pedagogy of whiteness can be as simple as shifting the focus of basic introductory material away from the disadvantages of black over to the advantages of white. "What we do not say, what we do not talk about, allows the status quo to continue….silence in the face of privilege sustains its invisibility" writes Stephanie M. Wildman and Adrienne D. Davis (2012:109). Traditional modes of social change have brought some advancements, but racial inequality still exists.

A variety of factors are certainly to blame for the continuing inequality present today. Liberalism may be failing to bring about the changes necessary for a healthier society. Even liberals can be blind to their privilege, this leads to actions that support and reaffirm the racist domination that they wish to eradicate (Solomon et al. 2005). Liberal policy routes to change have largely led to a continuation of racialized inequality. The power of dialogue and interrupting narratives are a meaningful alternative to change. Charles Perrow suggests that, "organizations must be continually reproduced and recreated through the actions of concrete individuals" (1979:247). Actions are carried out in ways that seem to be removed from class or power. Students exposed to whiteness discourse may recognize privilege in the mire of classless and colorless assumptions they are likely to be involved in as they go forward into careers.

The Role of Public Education in the Construction of Privilege

Pedagogies of race techniques initiated in institutions of higher learning disrupt whitewashed indoctrination from the K-12 experience. This awareness is important to impart on students before they integrate into the labor force where they are likely to perpetuate and further normalize white privilege. The K-12 school system is inflicted with re-segregation, discriminatory tracking, privatization, and inequality that are still denied by public policy (Braddock 1980; Braddock and Eitle 2004; Darling Hammond 2004; Braddock and Gonzalez 2010). White children that grow up in these environments have inequality normalized and their privilege legitimized. Students may often show up into

classrooms of higher education mostly oblivious to the structural and personal presence of white power that perpetuates racialized human suffering. If there is to be hope for change, those students preparing to enter the workforce should be faced with a critical pedagogy of whiteness that challenges what they thought they knew (Delpit 1997; Solomon et al. 2005; Trier 2005). Being that these problems are ignored as described through students' early education, pedagogical interventions at the post-secondary level are critical to enabling students to recognize and cease some of their own damaging practices.

Whiteness in Institutions of Higher Education

Efforts have been made in higher education to improve inter-racial relations through the implementation of diversity programs and affirmative action policies. These efforts, although upstanding in their spirit, may not entirely provide the change needed to achieve equality. Some policies equate to empty words, and others may be harmful if not implemented correctly. They reinforce stereotypes, create unequal positions, and result in self-segregation which all lead to the perpetuation of racial hierarchical statuses (Lewis et al. 2000). When diversity efforts are implemented strategically, increased learning opportunities can result (Hallinan 1998). Professors have an opportunity to offset the dominant racial ideology and even hostile campus climate limitations by directly challenging white privilege in their classrooms (Holyfield et al. 2009; Hytten and Adkins 2001; Miller & Harris 2005). It is just as vital for diversity programs to be designed with consideration of the student body within which they are to be implemented as it is for professors implementing pedagogical techniques of whiteness to consider the demographics of their class.

The processes of whiteness operate in institutions of higher education to perpetuate hierarchical society (Bonilla-Silva and Forman 2000; Gusa 2010; Lewis et al. 2000; Manglitz et al. 2005; Sue et al. 2009). The understanding of privilege is affective and emotional (Hytten et al. 2001). This fact will require new and creative ways of teaching and managing a classroom. The lecture education system that Paulo Friere (1970) describes as the "banking method" will not be sufficient for challenging whiteness.

Whiteness and Pedagogy Literature

A systematic search and review of the following literature provide tools for professors seeking to initiate a pedagogy of whiteness. This review partially answers the goal of this study: to list classroom dynamics conducive to

addressing whiteness, theoretically based class materials, and technique modifications to address certain peculiarities. The following paragraphs do not constitute an exhaustive literature review, but are a representation of the major themes associated with taking on the issue of whiteness and privilege in classroom environments. These key studies were used to construct the interview questions which served as starting points for the professors interviewed.

Classroom dynamics

Diane Lynn Gusa (2010) examines specific classroom problems encountered by professors when bumping up against what she refers to as "white institutional presence." Emotions can run high when the topic of privilege is addressed and this may lead professors to keep the focus on the "other" and their disadvantage. Without addressing the privilege part of the equation, emotional disturbance and indignation have gone untouched and ingrained and 'white' thinking will likely be re-created again (Solomon et al. 2005). For example, white entitlement is reflected when African Americans experience less "air time" in classes (Gusa 2010:472). Professors should be mindful not to construct classroom environments that "worship whiteness" such as communicating western idealism, or allowing discrimination practices to occur unquestioned. (hooks 2003:34).

Gale Young (2003) proposes a model of facilitating these difficult dialogues in classrooms around the issues of privilege. Based on input from professors, she compiles the traits of a positive classroom environment. These include a climate that fosters the type of cognitive and emotional inquiry that helps students identify feelings that need not be denied and an environment that aids students in developing skills for mindful listening. According to Young, an indicator of student transformation is the initiation of discussions by students that they would have normally avoided (2003:52).

In any environment resistance and subtle hostilities can abound. Non-verbal resistance can take the form of silence indicated by doodling, keeping laptops out, or eye rolling, (Huisman et al. 2005). Resistance can also come in the form of micro-aggressions, daily verbal indignities toward minority groups that can be intentional or unintentional (Derald Wing Sue et al. 2009). The denial of racial reality, in some ways, constitute micro-aggressions. Proper facilitation of meaningful discussion can prevent or diminish the impact of hostilities (Miller and Harris 2005).

This topic can incite a range of strong emotions so pedagogical approaches should suit the teacher's beliefs about the utility of the expression of emotions. Some teachers may decide that emotions propel social change (Pence and Fields 1999). Others may opt for a less charged approach such as case studies (Gillespie 2003).

Theoretical models as class material

Theoretically based classroom exercises seem both promising and problematic. The Privileged Identity Exploration model (PIE) predicts eight defense modes that arise in the face of difficult social justice issues (Watt 2007). Also, Helms White Racial Identity Attainment Model is useful say some, but is criticized by others who proclaim that there is not sufficient evidence to suggest that whites go through this linear process. Helms is also criticized for playing on and assuming a black-white dichotomy (Miller and Harris 2005). Others maintain that the use of this model can be effective as a pedagogical technique for students to identify the dynamics of phases they may go through, in whatever order (Marx 2004).

Professor characteristics

Classroom dynamics are likely to vary depending upon the gender of the teacher. Students' perception of the professor's competence is related to their acceptance of the whiteness curriculum. Diane Gillespie , Leslie Ashbaugh & Joann Defiore report, in their 2002 study of white women teaching on white privilege, found that women professors were continuously asked by their students about their legitimacy to teach on the topic of race and privilege. Students give male professors more respect than female professors and this can affect classroom dynamics (Heckert et al. 1999). Problems with curriculum delivery and acceptance by students are further exacerbated when the faculty member is a racial or ethnic minority. Black female faculty can be faced with direct white male oppression from their students (Pittman 2010). Pedagogical techniques must involve challenging students' gendered expectations while easing the uncomfortable feelings that are likely to arise with the topic itself (Gillespie et al. 2002).

Drawn from this variety of scholarship, professors who contributed to this research were selected to highlight some of the most common classroom problems in challenging whiteness and to provide useful practical tips for dealing with them. The broad goal of this research is to understand the social processes between students and teachers as they engage in dialogues about the highly emotionally charged issues of white privilege. The specific research aim is to list

effective classroom techniques for challenging white privilege through coursework and classroom dialogue, that are particularly useful for women.

METHODS

Four professors' techniques and experiences of challenging whiteness in classrooms of higher education were examined. Participants were asked about their own techniques based on their publications and the broader body of literature on this topic. This study design takes the form of a collective case study (Stake 1995, Baxter and Jack 2008). This format is useful for unveiling the detailed and

meaningful classroom characteristics useful for challenging white privilege in an exploratory study (Yin 1981, Stake 1995). Also, Yin (1994) suggests that case studies are valuable for investigating numerous detailed variables of interest that are not suitable to be used as data points. The case perspectives are of professors who are or have recently been active in challenging whiteness in dominantly white southern classrooms.

The interview questions were created from a compilation of literature findings, looking for common challenges experienced by professors and tools they draw from. The questions were designed to elicit in-depth descriptions of how the tools may be used in the classroom specifically, but also an open-ended style was utilized to capture new data. The findings were interpreted by continuous categorizing looking for patterns in the data. Professors were asked in 45 minute recorded interviews. The audio, along with a select number of articles, were entered and coded in NVivo. Per IRB requirements, the textual data was de-identified and pseudonyms were assigned. One professor teaches Sociology, one teaches Communication and the remaining two in Education. The four professors will be referred to as Dr. Davis, Dr. Buck, Dr. Grimke, and Dr. Lillian. Dr. Davis identifies as African-American and the other three identify as white, all identify as female and working at predominantly white universities in the South.

RESULTS

Data derived from the interviews and content suggest that there are pedagogical challenges and useful tools across five areas: (1) Classroom dynamics that consist of either commonly described classroom problems, such as silence and discussion domination, or rhetorical tools and discussion facilitation techniques found to be useful; (2) Course design includes lists of course materials, example assignments, and information ordering instructions; (3) Future directions addresses the utility of a meta-synthesis of pedagogical techniques; (4) Varying contexts and demographics, point to peculiarities that should be considered when implementing

the suggested techniques; and (5) Information retention and future behavior describes techniques that help students remember their lessons and influence their future action around racial justice.

Classroom Dynamics: Problems and Interventions

The following actions: discussion facilitation, questioning silence, handling dominators, and invoking particular rhetorical tools were some of the most mentioned techniques necessary to maintain a peaceful and productive classroom.

Facilitation

All of the professors interviewed saw themselves as a facilitator in some way. Davis describes a conversation that got somewhat heated:

"There are a few Jewish students in my class and they were being talked about by a white girl speaking. I had to jump in because I wanted to make sure there was no mis-communication and protect the students. I took the role of facilitator and explained, "I think what she's saying is..." The facilitator role is something I activate in nearly every class period you know because we're exchanging ideas and students are learning, we have to temper that with patience and understanding."

If we, as professors are facilitating, how can we respond to students in ways that keep conversation going? Buck suggests, "a pedagogy of whiteness…you can't approach that topic on just facts alone, because race is an emotional issue, that is wrapped up in a vortex of national shame." Lilian responds, "I think I would see myself more of a facilitator than a banker in the Friererian sense. I do facilitate, but I also do more than that, I present information in ways that elicit conversation, I use different materials. I used to get frustrated with resistance, now I expect it."

Question silence

Grimke expressed how important it is, and also how difficult it is, to break through student silence. She warns,

Students were very willing to talk at first, trying to buld trust and have everyone share their ideas. They get the sense that some students are saying the right thing and others are not. The students

who this is new to will become divided, you must keep interrogating. If you never do, your always allowing them to have that protectie silence, then you never feel like your accomplishing enough.

One confrontation is described by Buck, "in the face of silence, I'll say 'wow, it is difficult to talk about this, why is this so painful?' A student says, 'well it's painful because it makes me feel guilty' then I have an emotion to work with." Lilian comments on what might drive some students' silence, "I've been teaching for 20 years and writing on whiteness …there are students who claim to be open-minded, but who are very resistant in their discourse. They may be silent in one way, or they

then consistently engage in discourse that get them off the hook from systems and structures of privilege."

Handle dominators

These professors have similar and unique ways in which they handle dominators. Lillian explains:

> I focused all my attention on all the loud resistors, they're like a hangnail, you can't stop picking at it, it is usually one or two very vocal ones. I changed my own forms of engagement. I don't give as much space to those students....I'll call them into the office or I'll declare a moratorium on a topic. They're always wanting to blame parents. For example, they keep talking about it so I'll say 'let's just make it a given that parents are bad, let's focus on what we do control.'

Dominators may produce such a problem that solutions have to be brought outside of the classroom discourse. Buck says about one problem dominator, "I found him such a struggle, I had to bring him into the office and tried to have a conversation with him outside of the class"

Rhetorical tools: Use of examples

A popular rhetorical tool many professors use are simple examples. They may ask students to call out colorblind or overt racist statements, they provide specific details about the statement that was made. They can then use these instances to illustrate points and challenge ideas in creative ways. Lillian describes,

> This can be very difficult, sometimes the professor can have problems navigating through the examples. This is why I say more experience teaching makes it easier to figure out what's going on….in the past, I panicked because some students would come up with an example that I can't respond to. After so many years, I have many more resources and a better instant ability to respond to them.

Rhetorical tools: Help students find common ground

Another rhetorical tool that Davis mentioned is that of helping students to find common ground. "When a student says something like, 'I'm not racist because I have a black friend' you might ask, 'Who all agrees with this statement?'" One might want to assess how many students agree with the statement and take on the challenge step by step. Sometimes, the students may make the argument for the professor, but other times the professor will need to dig

into their statements, in this case you might ask, 'do you notice [your friend] getting treated differently?' You may also ask, 'how often do you [and your black friend] see each other?' Perhaps, you can ask the student, "does [having a black friend] help you understand black communities?'" Then, find students who can argue the statements, or agree with those that move them forward deeper into their own privilege. An unveiling of dominating ideology occurs when students find that they have common assumptions, that is if the professor continuously points out how this is unfolding in the classroom dialogue.

Course Design

All the professors specifically tailor the course design to maximize their ability to get through to the students on this topic. They all mentioned creative (1) materials; (2) ordering of information; and (3) assignments. Categories of tools used to design their course.

Materials

A number of materials were used to challenge whiteness, some of these included: *The Invisible Knapsack* (McIntosh 1989), *Color of Fear* (Lee et al.1995), and podcasts and interviews appropriate for class. Also, Bonilla-Silva's (2002) *The Linguistics of Color Blind Racism* is used as follows: the professor allows the students to call out color-blind racist rhetoric throughout the semester and brings it up for discussion. Also, Alan Johnson's Privilege *Power and Difference* (2001) was found to be useful, as was Helms' *White Identity Development* workbook, and a *"Brown Eyes/Blue Eyes"* spinoff of Jane Elliot. These were the most common materials used to address the subject of whiteness.

Order of information

Many of the professors felt the ordering of the information was important. "Unpack the privilege first, then deal with the inequalities." Buck continues,

> Move them through the guilt and shame that surrounds that, and so on." Grimke pointed out that "your students are going to be all over the map. I had them all present a collage to explain who they are and what is their expereince with diversity. I tried to get at what that rely on and that helped me address them. We can't assume their naive, we have to assume peole come from a wide background. You would have never thought I would be spending my life researching racism, a white female from the farm.

Grimke, however, chooses a slow easing into the topic "I introduce whiteness material very diligently and slowly and in a gentle way." Lillian introduces the book of Alan Johnson (2001): *Privilege, Power and Difference. "*It starts from the assumption that people have not been exposed to this stuff, it tells you that you're not a bad person and that we all participate in racism without realizing it and its very much done, expecting resistance." Professor Davis uses films, "They can be very useful for getting a lot of information in very quickly early on in a course, in frontloading, we have to draw their attention right away, we want to catch them early." Each professor has unique timing for presenting various materials, but they each agree that it is a process.

Assignments

Some professors mentioned specific assignments they use to challenge privilege. "We have to use other pedagogical techniqus besides just dialogue," says Lillian, "small group disscusssion, projects performances, static representations, and a variety of assignments and demonstrations of learning should be used so we are not always talking."

Grimke has students assess their identity, "I found Helms to be very interesting, she's put out, in a workbook form, my undergraduates take this self - assessment." Also, she adds, "they have websites to review for credit." They use the web material as exercises in recognizing colorblind racism.

Davis juxtaposes making the students teachers. "I'll say today you all are gonna teach each other, then break them down into groups, I put the responsibiity on the students to get them involved. They also have to turn in response papers."

The creative use of the right assignments will challenge privilege. Requirements for the course can contribute greatly to the overall effect of the initiative to bring privilege to light. When combined together, these course design and class facilitation techniques were found to be effective in bringing about change in student attitudes.

Contexts and Demographics

A number of class characteristics should be considered when deciding on a plan of curriculum and discourse; some are listed here. Class size should affect when you can and should do. In large classrooms, it was suggested that students may feel anonymous and might speak less politically correct which can open up dialogue. Small classrooms on the other hand are more appropriate for creative small group activities. Also the geographical location of the university is important for considering approaches to challenging privilege. The racial climate may be harsh with deep-seated racism, or it may be a progressive environment where the curriculum and discussion may start out quite different.

An important difference is the race and gender of the professor. This study dealt with only females, but Dr. Davis, the only black participant, discussed at length how she questions white students' resistance and their disrespect. She states, "I wonder are they challenging me because I'm black, or are they challenging me because they're concerned about this particular issue, or is it because I'm female?" The demographics of student and teacher should always be considered in a course of action with students.

Sustaining What They Have Learned

When asked input considering providing opportunities for students to use what they have learned and sustain challenging their own privilege, Lillian responded,

> I had an undergrad that I taught also as a graduate, it amazed me, the student said "how come we didn't learn any of this stuff as an undergraduate?" and I was like "you actually did because you took my class, and in fact you read this very book, " but I think if you don't have a community to continue conversations, your going to go back to those individualistic meritocratic arguments.

That quote illustrates how little very change faculty and this type of dialogue may bring about, but professors have expressed creative ideas for keeping the students engaged with this topic, what long term impact this have, we may never fully know.

> I can't come up with solutions, but I can create possibilities, they need to know the journey is not finished, they need to continue working, whether that is reading more, talking to people, taking another class, going to professional development workshops, I can give them sources for news, alternative perspective and angles,

> introduce them to alternative journals, critical analysis outlets...but if they don't, they are gonna go right back to the ways they always been. (Lillian)

Lack of retention was a serious concern for participants. Participatory projects were found to engage students in a more meaningful way over long term. Western Oregon University (Braa and Callero 2006) is implementing such projects. An organization was formed as an ongoing praxis component of Sociology instruction. Attempts to alter thought, and ultimately dominance, needs more than a semester of creative inventions. Ongoing and engaging student projects are an emerging technique for challenging privilege in a sustainable manner.

Given the complexity of addressing privilege in classrooms, participants, in a sense, both support and resist the idea of such a guide. Though useful, says Lilian,

> It should not be seen as an easy way to avoid difficult discussions…the more we read, the more we understand what works and what doesn't work, I'm not sure there's any sore of magic bullet, you get better at doing things by doing them. Do not think a guide will be a way to evade the responsible engagement of these conversations.

The other three professors thought the manual would be valuable.

CONCLUSION

A variety of classroom problems are likely to occur, or be exacerbated, with the introduction of a pedagogy of whiteness. Some students fall silent while others dominate discussions. A number of rhetorical tools can be invoked to facilitate better class dialogues like using emotion-quelling examples and helping students find common ground with various oppressed groups. This research compiled a useful list of course materials and course design ideas: Some classics, like Peggy McIntosh's Invisible Knapsack (1989) and other new podcast ideas to analyze in class. Also, introducing materials in a particular order led students to be much more open to participating in constructive discussions. It is particularly important to provide students with the tools necessary to critically think about whiteness in the first days of class. Professors noted several characteristics to consider when implementing techniques, variations in class size, the professor's own racial identity, and campus climate should be considered in course design. Finally, professors being very concerned with information retention suggest that students who access information sources continually throughout the semester are more likely to continue to access those long after class ends. Exposing them to ongoing anti-racist projects while in one's class helps students to be continually racially conscious and actively interested in equality.

This study has outlined what educators can experience in the classroom and introduced the tools to navigate those difficult lessons on whiteness and racial inequality, engaging both the published literature and professor perspectives to do so. This information has been combined here in a form that is accessible to professors and easily translatable to their own classrooms.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Though the data collected is extremely limited, there are a still number of implications for this study. A "naturalistic" generalization is inherent in the way

the study resonates with the reader (Stake 1995). This type of generalizability is appropriate for the purpose of assisting professors who are attempting to tackle the issues of white privilege in their classrooms. The consumption of this material by current and future teachers can help guide their strategies in ways that are pertinent to their own classroom, unique situations, and particular teaching styles. The generalizability of this material, therefore, is determined by each professional based on the utility of these techniques in their own circumstance.

Future research should investigate more educators' perspectives, particularly investigating how discourse plays out in their various higher education contexts. Campus climate, subject areas, class size, economic status, racial, ethnic, and gender makeup of student bodies and professor identities should all be considered in order to formulate the safest and most effective techniques possible. A full meta-synthesis of the qualitative work already published on this topic could be a useful resource. Most importantly, this research is useful for designing teaching practice and action research projects focused on student growth and critical thinking skills. Professors in higher education are charged with a duty: to explore and implement the best techniques of managing classroom discourse in a way that can prepare students to construct a better world based on awakening to the power of their own privilege.

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