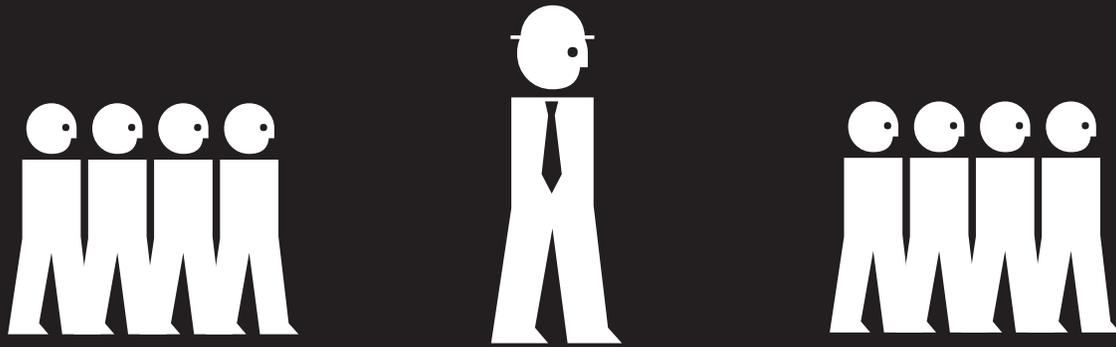


# LET'S TALK ABOUT RACE, BABY



Accounts of teaching themes of White privilege and racism to college students have been presented by Tatum (1992, 1994), Gillespie, Ashbaugh and DeFiore (2002), and Rich and Cargile (2004). Tatum described her experience as an African-American woman teaching both White students and students of color, albeit in predominantly White settings, illustrating their growing awareness of racism. Tatum framed this change in students' self-awareness within Helms' (1993) model of racial identity development. Gillespie, et al. depicted being White women teaching a class comprised predominantly of White, middle-class women, noting that the suburban college setting allowed for a particular focus on the resistance to these topics that is typically encountered when teaching White students. The authors utilized a four phase model which resulted in "a set of more purposeful strategies for teaching about Whiteness and privilege" (p. 239). Rich and Cargile used "social drama" (Turner, as cited in Rich & Cargile, 2004) as a powerful mechanism for learning. However, this learning was also made possible with a diverse classroom in which over half the class was comprised of students of color.

Similar to Tatum (1994) and Gillespie, et al. (2002), I have taught classes

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*Peter Heinze is an assistant professor of clinical psychology in the School of Social Science and Human Services at Ramapo College of New Jersey, Mahwah, New Jersey.*

primarily comprised of White, middle-class women in a suburban college setting. However, some differences do exist. First, I am a White, heterosexual male, so my own history, personal experience, and the way in which I am experienced by others is different from that of both Tatum and Gillespie, et al. Second, I present themes of White privilege and racism within the context of teaching a multicultural psychology course, emphasizing that students must first learn that there is such a thing as White culture which influences their understanding of other cultures (Katz, 1999; Hitchcock, 2002). Third, having been trained as a clinical psychologist, a number of the teaching methods I use differ from those detailed by some authors, although there is an appreciation of Helms' racial identity model which Tatum (1992), also a clinical psychologist, endorses.

Finally, being psychoanalytically oriented, I interpret certain dynamics within the classroom from this perspective, with a particular focus on unconscious processes on both the individual and group level. This article will present the teaching methods I employ, addressing a number of the aforementioned factors, with the hope that these are additional tools which can be utilized in this critically important field of White privilege and anti-racism pedagogy.

## Racism as a Continuum

Prior to discussing my approach to teaching about White privilege and racism,

it is worthwhile to address how I conceptualize the way in which White people learn about their racial identity. As mentioned, Tatum (1992, 1994) depicts how Helms' (1993) model of racial identity frames the progression of her students' level of racial awareness, ranging from obliviousness to racism (Contact stage) to reduced guilt, an awareness of one's role in perpetuating racism and a desire to abandon entitlement (Autonomy stage). Similarly, Hitchcock (2002) applies Helms' model to his own experience as a White male, describing his gradual progression from lower to higher stages of racial awareness. In contrast, Rich & Cargile's (2004) discussion of the transformation of racial awareness that occurs among students suggests that it is not as linear as Helms' model would suggest, but rather a "sometimes confused and ongoing change that continually affects." (p. 362) This latter conceptualization suggests that one might waver in their sense of racial awareness, shifting from enlightenment at one moment then back to denial, the next.

Regardless of whether one accepts a paradigm of racial awareness that's linear (such as Helms' stage model) or one which is fluid, both suggest a sense of gradual change that is not immediate. Amenable to both perspectives is the idea that a White person's level of racism is best depicted as sitting somewhere along a continuum. Both Helms' and Rich & Cargile's models avoid the misguided notion that racism is reducible to a simple dichotomy: that individuals are either racist or they are

# HOW A WHITE PROFESSOR TEACHES WHITE STUDENTS ABOUT WHITE PRIVILEGE & RACISM

*Peter Heinze*

not. Of note, those who have scrutinized White culture are quick to identify that a reliance on Cartesian dualism (Monteiro & Fuqua, 1994) which drives a strong faith in the scientific method (e.g., linear thinking, cause and effect relationships, quantitative emphasis) (Katz, 1999) is an integral component of the White Euro-American worldview. Therefore, the tendency of White Euro-Americans to employ such dichotomous thinking should be of little surprise. Additionally, as will be discussed below, psychoanalytic group theory provides some further insight regarding the tendency of most Whites not to perceive of themselves as racist.

What makes Hitchcock's (2002) account of his own racial awareness so compelling is his courageous acknowledgement that, even with being married to a Black woman, he has harbored tacitly racist thoughts. To his credit, he did not deny that he had these thoughts (one who denies having racist thoughts might be considered to fit into Helms' "Contact" stage), rather he acknowledged these and tried to understand their source. Being born White in U.S. society makes it virtually impossible to be immune from both mythical images of White superiority and the concurrent stereotypes of people of color. Hence, it is more realistic to consider that Whites don't simply wake up one day and pronounce that they are no longer going to have racist thoughts (that they go from being racist to non-racist), but rather even those who have engaged in self-reflection regarding their own racism

might still harbor, whether consciously or unconsciously, racist thoughts. Therefore, for both the way in which I understand myself as a White person and as a way to teach students, I embrace the idea of a continuum of racism, with individuals located at all points. It is this understanding of White racial awareness that drives the core message of my pedagogy.

## **Pedagogical Assumptions**

The multicultural psychology course I teach operates on a number of pedagogical assumptions. First, it is counterproductive, and only serves to further tacit or unconscious racism, if multicultural psychology ignores looking at Whites as "raced," as we do with other groups we study. To teach multicultural psychology without first examining aspects of White culture, such as rugged individualism, Protestant work ethic, future orientation, etc. (Katz, 1999), which contribute to the dynamics of White privilege and racism sends the erroneous message that White culture doesn't exist.

Of note, when asking students to discuss the concept of White culture, one White male astutely noted that the word "culture" almost by default implies "other" groups. He mentioned that when he heard the term he never thought of Whites as falling under the category "culture." For readers curious about the subject, Hitchcock (2002) provides an in depth discussion about the etiology and nature of White-American culture.

This leads to the second pedagogical

assumption, that once White students understand White culture exists, it will provide them with an important foundation with which to more comprehensively, and sensitively, understand the experience of the other cultural groups studied in the course: African-, Latino/a-, Native- and Asian-Americans in the United States. Part of this increased sensitivity is an acknowledgement of the often nuanced way in which power and privilege play into inter-cultural interactions and relationships. Because of the importance of having this as a foundation for learning during the semester, the strategy employed is to have students spend the first few weeks of the course understanding White culture and White privilege and how these interact with racism.

The third pedagogical assumption is that an increased awareness of their own White privilege and unconscious racism, as well as an understanding of the pervasiveness of institutional racism, allows students to understand the material on the other cultural groups studied in a substantively different way. Rather than objectifying other groups as the ones "having culture," students can appreciate that they exist within a culture that influences the very way in which they perceive, and judge, those who they see as being culturally different.

Additionally, having White students early in the semester regularly discuss "racism" and "racists" desensitizes them to the terms. This is critically important, since much of the experience of people of color in the United States has been

defined by the racist oppression of White America. Hence, when students read about aspects of African-, Latino/a, Native- and Asian-American culture they are exposed to articles that liberally use the terms “racist” and “racism” when referring to White-American policies and practices.

For example, Tong (1994) explicitly identifies racism as a core component of Asian-American psychology. Along these lines, Karenga (1993) in discussing the radical school of Black psychology, reviews the work of authors such as Cress Welsing, who clearly identified the role that racism played in White consciousness, and Wright, who described European Whites as psychopaths who are callous and absent of feelings of guilt.

If White students are not first desensitized to terms such as “racist” and “racism,” as well as other descriptors that might be interpreted as pejorative, they are likely to respond defensively when reading such accounts of White Americans by authors of color. This can very easily result in White students not fully comprehending and appreciating the important themes these authors are articulating, which translates into an outcome directly opposed to the intended objective of the course: having White students gain a greater appreciation of multicultural psychology!

However, if White students can spend the first few weeks becoming comfortable with terms such as “racist” and understand that their use does not mean that, as Whites, they are inherently bad as individuals, there will be more of an openness to understanding the use of such descriptors by authors of color in their accounts of the experiences that non-White cultural groups have had in the United States.

### Themes Covered, Exercises Used, and Teaching Tools

There are a number of themes regarding White privilege and racism that I typically address in class, often used in conjunction with experiential exercises to help promote learning. Additionally, the text for this portion of the course is *White Privilege* (Rothenberg, 2002) and it is used as a reference for the themes covered.

One of the first themes is examined via an exercise entitled “The Benefits of Being White.” Students are divided into small groups based on whether they identify as White or as a person of color. With a class size of 30 students, this usually results in about five groups of White students and one group of students of color. All groups have to write down as many benefits of being White as they can identify. Typically what

occurs is that, cumulatively, the five or so groups of White students create a shorter list of benefits (usually about six benefits) than the single group of the students of color (usually about eight benefits).

In the rare instance in which the White students create a larger list, I ask the students to consider the number of responses per student. For example in one class, 28 White students created a list of 14 benefits, whereas only two students of color created a list of eight benefits—in other words students of color could think of four benefits each, while it took two of their White counterparts to think of one benefit.

I then ask the class to interpret this phenomenon of the majority of Whites compiling a shorter list of benefits (or proportionally fewer benefits per student) than their counterparts of color. White students are usually struck with how challenging it is to create such a list. Doing so enables them to have a much more meaningful understanding of White privilege, and its commensurate blindness, as depicted in articles such as “Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” by McIntosh (2002) in which the author lists 26 such benefits.

Dyer (2002) discusses how Whites are perceived as the “norm,” relegating other cultural groups to hyphenated status (e.g., African-Americans, Asian-Americans, Native Americans) which implies that these groups are not the “norm,” or “abnormal.” To examine this dynamic, a version of an exercise called “The Race Game” created by Thandeka (as described by Hitchcock, 2002) is used. Outside of class, White students are asked, when in an all-White setting, to use the word “White” whenever they are describing an encounter with a Euro-American (Thandeka suggests that the game be performed for a week).

For example, “I was at the supermarket and there was a White cashier who was so friendly” or “There was a White sales clerk at the store today who was so rude.” The objective of this exercise is to bring

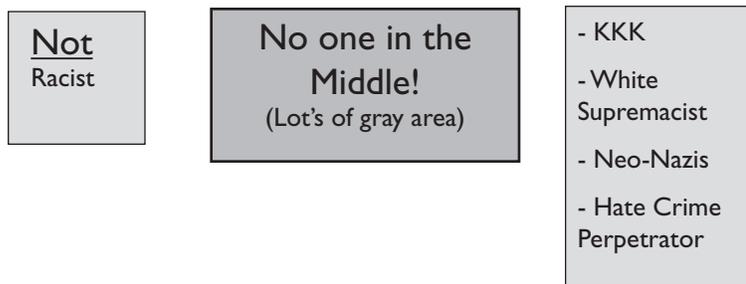
into awareness the fact that Whiteness is never acknowledged by White people. Typically, a number of White students never attempt the game and a range of justifications are offered. I ask these students to try and consider some alternative, unconscious reasons why they didn’t try the exercise. For those who do the exercise, the typical reaction is that it “Felt weird.”

We examine this reaction more fully and gain an appreciation that the “weirdness” is due to the fact that they are verbalizing a heretofore unacknowledged dynamic...that Whites are perceived as the “norm” and, therefore, do not need to be labeled (e.g., “hyphenated”). Of course, accompanying this tacit belief is that those who aren’t the “norm” are in some way “abnormal.” As this disparity is brought into consciousness, White students realize that the “weirdness” they describe feeling is, in fact, discomfort with acknowledging the position of power that they have been ascribed in our society as a function of their skin color.

Essentially, the only difference between the White students who try the exercise and those who don’t is a matter of risk taking. I would suggest that the underlying feeling for both those who try it and those who don’t is the same: it “feels weird.” I try to have those who didn’t try the exercise consider the possibility that, in fact, they are not that different from those who did.

Another theme I present is conceptualizing racism on a continuum. As alluded to earlier, the tendency to accept the false dichotomy that people are either racist or non-racist is one dynamic that plays into the belief of many Whites that they are not racist. This is fueled and supported by the underlying Cartesian dualism that influences much of the White Euro-American worldview. Hitchcock (2002) describes this dynamic in more depth in his discussion of Whites who consider themselves “colorblind.” An illustration of this false dichotomy is presented in Figure 1.

**Figure 1**  
**Racism as a Dichotomy: Emphasis Is on Behavior**





seen when, for example, a toddler sustains a hurt, which was not due to any behavior on the part of the caretaker, and the child proceeds to yell at the caretaker "It's all your fault! I hate you!" The anger resulting from the injury is so intense that it is split off and projected onto the caretaker, who is experienced as the source of hurt. Klein's concepts of splitting and projection have been applied to intra- and inter-group relations (Wells, 1990). With regard to the way in which Whites tend to dichotomize their idea of who is racist and who is not, group relations theory would suggest that those perceived as the "true racists" (KKK, Neo-Nazis, etc.) are convenient targets for the split-off, negative racist feelings that most Whites harbor.

Such a process allows the "average" White person to maintain a positive sense of self, as they can rid themselves of any undesirable qualities (racist thinking) by projecting these onto the "true racists," who are perceived as the containers of everything bad. I suggest to the class that one reason that KKK and Neo-Nazi types are so intriguing to us is that it lets us comfortably explore aspects of our own unconscious that we don't want to acknowledge exists. A more detailed analysis of why Whites are "attracted" to White supremacists is presented by Heinze (2006).

One caveat in presenting racism as a continuum is that it might lead to the erroneous assumption that racism is simply a matter of individual awareness and that eradicating racism can be accomplished solely by changing one's level of awareness. Clearly, institutional racism is an insidious culprit in terms of the experience of people of color in the United States. In order to avoid the pitfall of having students perceive racism as simply an issue of individual change, a number of contributions which address the role of institutional racism are presented in the *White Privilege* text (Rothenberg, 2002) and these are thoroughly explored in class. An attempt is made throughout the course to delineate how individual and institutional racism are distinct but also intertwined.

However, I would also ask the reader to consider that often individual racism and institutional racism are conceptualized as discrete entities, another dichotomy which, I would argue is erroneous. As Katz (1999) notes,

organizations are made of individuals, and the 'life' and 'thoughts' and 'systems' of the organizations are human systems. And individuals are always to some degree a product of their culture. The cultural level interacts with all others and informs them. (p. 1)

Cumulatively, when the people who represent the majority are organized on an institutional level these biases become institutionalized, exponentially so. I feel it is important to emphasize to White students that, in fact, individual and institutional racism are interwoven and, as future members of society's institutions, their level of individual bias will also be magnified exponentially as collective members of institutions.

Logically, if the individuals who comprise organizations begin to shift their consciousness and address and limit their own racism, it will, in fact, affect the level of institutional racism. If only a handful of White students experience a change in consciousness and a greater awareness of White privilege and racism, when they join the workforce they will be in positions to hire the person of color who otherwise might not have been, be able to connect with the student of color in a more authentic way that demonstrably affects learning, and be able to actually listen, and not dismiss, an employee of color who has concerns about inequities and treatment in the workplace. The abatement of individual racism does, indeed, influence institutional racism.

### Using Myself as a Model

Should I, a White, Euro-American instructor, be teaching about racism and White privilege? One of the first questions that I had to ask myself before deciding to teach about these topics was "Do I have the necessary self-awareness of my own racism in order to adequately teach about White privilege and racism?" If, when considering this question, I felt that either I was not racist or had "worked through" all my racist thoughts/feelings, it might well have served as an indicator that I was not yet ready to teach about these themes.

Ironically, I feel it is my ability as a White instructor to acknowledge my own racism that most likely makes me best able to teach about it. Hence, I feel that one of the essential qualities necessary for teaching about White privilege and racism is a heightened sense of self-awareness. Without this awareness, I would imagine that the White instructor ventures into very dangerous territory, being potentially blind to their own racism while teaching a topic in which one of the cornerstones of learning is the lack of acknowledgment of blindness on the part of White Euro-Americans in U.S. society. In other words, the White instructor unaware of his/her own racism is likely to reenact in the classroom the dynamic of blindness to power and privilege that exists and persists in our society.

As such, I have found that one of the keys to effectively teaching about themes of White privilege and racism is the degree to which I can use myself as a model with which White students can identify. Regardless of the course, many White students I have taught seem initially hesitant to speak during class. Feelings of anxiety, self-consciousness, worries about what others may think, and concerns about saying something that will meet with my approval are just a few of the factors that appear to contribute to this dynamic of inhibition. French (1997) discusses anxiety in the classroom from a psychoanalytic perspective, stating that "simply being with others stimulates primitive existential anxieties: In what sense will we 'meet'? At what level can we affect each other? Will I be accepted or rejected, liked, loved, or hated, ignored or even not noticed?" If we assume "meeting" the "other" generates anxiety, then themes of racism clearly generate anxiety, as Whites must confront their treatment of those they consider to be the "other."

Indeed, as Tatum (1992) notes, when White students discuss racism it often elicits strong feelings of guilt and shame that can be experienced as anger and defensiveness. One factor contributing to this dynamic has been described by Lewis-Charp (2003), who noted how White students often are hesitant to speak about race-related themes for fear that they will be misinterpreted and judged by students of color. Indeed, when Whites have negative experiences in cross-cultural groups, it can actually serve to *harden* preexisting prejudices and biases, due to a self-fulfilling prophecy along the lines of "See, I knew these people would be angry, hostile, etc." Although there are typically very few students of color in my courses, I suspect that the phenomenon described by Lewis-Charp is at play.

One of the most important ways in which I can allay student fears and, in turn, increase verbal participation is by using myself as a model in teaching the material. I do this in a number of ways. First, acknowledging my own humanness is essential. Specifically, I consistently emphasize that the tendency to stereotype and form bias is, in great part, due to the natural tendency of the mind to organize and structure stimuli (Cave, 1997; Macrae & Bodenhausen, 2000). As Myers (2005) states,

Stereotyped beliefs and prejudiced attitudes exist not only because of social conditioning and because they enable people to displace hostilities, but also as by-products of normal thinking processes. Many stereotypes spring less from malice

of the heart than the machinery of the mind. (p. 357)

Based on this reality, I regularly communicate to my students that, because this is a normal human predilection, I also still wrestle with trying to disentangle myself from the stereotypes of people of color, as well as the stereotype of White supremacy, which U.S. society, from birth, engrains in the minds of Whites. Specifically, I disclose instances of my own racist thoughts, emphasizing that even as someone who consistently works on greater awareness and sensitivity with regard to White privilege and racism, I still am subject to being conditioned as a White, heterosexual male in U.S. society. I also cite other prominent White anti-racist authors, such as Hitchcock (2002), who disclose similar experiences of grappling with and trying to understand their own tacit racism. Illustrating to the class that there are good White people (hopefully like their professor!) who actually have “bad” thoughts helps to free the students from the dichotomous trap of seeing themselves as “bad” people if they happen to entertain similar thoughts.

Using myself as a model in this way not only reinforces the idea of racism existing along a continuum, it allows the students to see me as similar to them. As a result, I avoid creating the false image of the professor who possesses all the knowledge on how to not be racist versus the students who are in an “uninformed” racist condition, simply waiting for the professor to impart all of his wisdom. By avoiding this dynamic, students see me as more real, approachable, and, most importantly, fallible. The more real and less-than-perfect I appear to the students, the more likely they will be to acknowledge their own imperfections and feel comfortable presenting what they often perceive as their “politically incorrect” thoughts.

However, as Gonsalves-Domond (personal communication) suggests, this process of self-disclosure on my part is also easier for a White male since, by contrast, an instructor of color has much more to risk disclosing such personal biases in front of a predominantly White class. Hence, White privilege allows for self-disclosure to be an easier task for me.

The point at which students begin offering comments that they might have previously kept silent is when the real “work” takes place. I perceive this as the first “baby step” in shifting along the continuum. When a student offers an idea that might be blind to dynamics such as institutional racism, such as “My family came here from another country and succeeded, why can’t Black people do the

same” or “Why should there be a need for Affirmative Action, I think that’s reverse racism,” a clear opportunity for learning has taken place. It is critical that in such a moment the student not feel criticized for making this comment, as the result will likely be embarrassment, disappointment, and anger, not to mention the clear possibility that the student will no longer participate in class. If that were to happen, the student’s learning, for all intents and purposes, would cease. It is in these moments that I try to both support and validate the student while simultaneously challenging her/his preconceptions.

When such a comment is made, the first thing I do is try to remind myself that the student’s comment may not necessarily indicate disagreement with the material being presented, but might actually reflect a reaction to the new information being taught, which contradicts their existing worldview. The act of disagreeing might actually indicate a subtle shift in the student’s point of view and simply may be the best way the student can express it. In a sense, I look at the disagreement as veiled interest. Doing this puts me in a psychological place which allows me to not be defensive or impatient with the student. I also remind myself that in my own past I might have maintained such thoughts as well.

Additionally I try to keep cognizant of the fact that, as group relations theory suggests (Wells, 1990), most likely the student making the comment is not the only one who maintains that point of view. Rather, it is safe to assume that a number of students share the perspective of the student, who happens to be speaking on behalf of this group. Hence, if I am critical of the student’s comment, I risk alienating not just that student, but most likely a number of others who share such sentiments. Clearly, this would result in silencing a number of students, creating a less than maximal environment for learning about such a complex, nuanced and sensitive subject.

Next, depending on the context, I will praise the student for having the courage to make a statement that challenges the point of view being expressed. However, rather than address or contradict the student directly with my own point of view, I will make a statement that will turn the student’s comment into a springboard for class discussion. This is done by making a statement such as “Thanks, Susan, for making that comment. Many people often feel that way, but they are afraid to verbalize such thoughts, so I appreciate your honesty. What does the class think of the idea of (reverse racism, individual responsibility, etc.)”

My experience has been that this technique achieves a number of goals: (1) The student making the comment feels validated and is most likely to continue participating; (2) It allows me to model acceptance and tolerance of dissenting points of view, a critical skill that, as educators, we want to model and which students need to acquire when discussing emotionally laden issues; (3) The class as a whole is able to take ownership of a theme and actively engage in understanding, as opposed to simply feeling as if they are forced to digest either my point of view or those of the assigned readings—this also unravels the myth that all the knowledge is located within the “experts” (me and/or the readings) and that the students, in reality, possess the knowledge to address these themes in a cogent manner, which they do; and (4) It avoids the unpleasant dynamic of censorship.

Unfortunately, many well-intentioned individuals committed to social justice can become angry at those seen as perpetrating injustice and, in response, can respond by either dismissing or silencing those who are perceived to echo or support the voice of the “oppressor.” Such an approach does not consider the possibility that those perceived as expressing support of the “oppressors” might simply be blind to a number of privileges and that acknowledgment of such privilege, and the blindness to it, can only be gained through additional learning, increased self-awareness and greater insight, which certainly cannot occur if one is feeling criticized or attacked for their point of view.

I would also suggest that those who engage in such harsh criticism of individuals who they perceive as expressing the sentiments of the “racists” are also falling into the trap of dichotomously viewing people as neatly fitting into only one of two categories: the “racists” or the “non-racists.” If we as teachers of anti-racism convey such a dichotomous perspective to our students, we risk alienating those who otherwise might have been able to achieve a shift in consciousness.

However, it is also important to remain cognizant of the fact that those committed to social justice who might express their outrage by dismissing or silencing students might not only have been traumatized in their lifetime by oppression, but also are likely to experience a form of retraumatization in the classroom (Gonsalves-Domond, personal communication). In other words a professor of color (or of any other oppressed group) has to consistently work against being the target of students’ projections in way that I, as a White, heterosexual, male, do not. For an instructor who has

experienced such trauma, it clearly is more difficult to deal with the student opinions that echo the views of oppression and privilege, making the desire to silence such ideas understandable. Indeed, my own belief that students should not be silenced for expressing these views is certainly influenced by my own White privilege and the absence of such trauma in my own life.

Another dynamic I attempt to model is that awareness of White privilege and racism is about *learning* and not knowing. I emphasize that I am still engaging in a process of learning: learning about the subtle and tacit ways in which White supremacy and racism play out in U.S. society and how this, beyond my awareness, can cause me to adopt racist thinking. By conveying to the students that I am still learning as well, I am modeling the stages of racial awareness that Helms (1993) describes while also avoiding perpetuating the false dichotomy that there are those who reach the point where they've learned all there is to know about racism versus those who are ignorant.

### **In vivo Examples of Racism**

One of the best ways in which I can demonstrate that I am still subject to racist thoughts, even with having done much work regarding my own racism, is by verbalizing when such thoughts occur during class. This provides an *in vivo* example of unconscious racism for the students.

An instance which comes to mind occurred during a class exercise in which students, in small groups, were discussing their experiences with racism. When Isabelle (a pseudonym), a Latina student who spoke with an accent, described to her group an incident in which she had friends who were interrogated by a police officer I asked her to tell it to me. When it came time to share stories with the class, I asked various students to do so, and they proceeded to share their experiences. However, when it was Isabelle's turn, I began to tell her story for her. I did so because, consciously, I was concerned that because of her accent the students would not understand Isabelle's story. After I began speaking, I immediately wondered why I felt the need to tell the story *for* Isabelle, rather than have her tell the class itself.

From a logical standpoint, if I was able to understand Isabelle's story, the students in class certainly could. However, racism isn't logical. On an unconscious level, I felt the need to act paternalistic, an all too common vestige of the Euro-American legacy of treatment of people of color, and to protect Isabelle in some

way by telling the story for her so that the class would understand. Historically, one dimension of "liberal" racism to which Whites have been blind is the disempowering message that their well-intentioned paternalism evokes. In my attempt to "protect" Isabelle, I sent a dangerous message to the class—that students of color, and those with accents, are unable to express their own ideas and, in some way, need assistance from White men.

However, as soon as I was done telling the story, I immediately shared my internal dialogue with the class. This was an opportunity for the class to witness an *in vivo* example of unconscious racism. I was sure to point out what just happened: How I had, without full awareness, acted in a way that sent a message about my perception of the capability, or lack thereof, of a student of color. I emphasized that this, indeed, was an example of how subtle racism can be.

Importantly, had I not disclosed my thoughts to the class, I doubt it would have gone unnoticed by all students. I believe students are quite sensitive to such nonverbal and indirect behaviors on the part of their professors and derive much meaning from these actions. Additionally, had I not realized this slight, or realized it and decided not to mention to the class, I would have sent a message that defied the very themes I was attempting to teach: that racism is often not overt aggression, but manifests itself in a range of subtle and nuanced ways and, in fact, it is often blindness on the part of well-intentioned whites that contributes to various forms of racism.

Earlier when I discussed whether I thought, as a White person, I was equipped to teach about racism, I mentioned that it should only be taught if one has the sufficient level of self-awareness about their own level of racism. I would add that in addition to self-awareness, the instructor also needs to be courageous. I would suggest that the above example is the necessary level of self-awareness and courage to which I am alluding. When I teach White students about racism, not only do I need to be aware of instances in which my own racism surfaces, I also have to possess the courage to disclose such thoughts to the students. Revealing such subtle instances of racist thinking helps to make these dynamics more tangible to the students. By doing so the experience of having negative thoughts and feelings that whites maintain, but are typically hesitant to express, is normalized, hopefully making the students more comfortable in expressing such thoughts as well.

### **Handling the Reaction to Student Acceptance or Rejection of White Privilege**

When White students recognize their own skin color privilege, it typically results in a spectrum of reactions, marked by either an acknowledgment of the reality of White privilege or denial and resistance at each extreme. I would argue that all the reactions are triggered by similar emotions, and it is only the degree to which students are in touch with these emotions that determines whether they acknowledge or deny White privilege. As mentioned above, the feelings that seem to be most commonly expressed are guilt and/or shame. When individuals experience guilt and/or shame, they can either acknowledge or deny such feelings. Hence, comments such as "I wish I wasn't White," express the acknowledgement of guilt and/or shame, while statements such as "Well what about reverse racism?" reveal a desire to deny the experience of such feelings. Regardless, I find it important to remind myself that, most likely, the students are actually experiencing the same core emotions even though their expressed thoughts might appear to be quite contradictory.

In response to these reactions, I emphasize that this topic is not about making White people feel guilty or badly about themselves. Rather, it's about White privilege and how one addresses it once it has been acknowledged. The objective is not so much relinquishing one's privilege as much as it is doing what is necessary to ensure that all people receive the same benefits. This is the point at which students can begin to consider what they can do to begin balancing the scales. This is followed by a discussion about what Whites can do to address issues of White privilege and racism, allowing students who are so inclined to consider a range of ways in which they can help. At the college at which I teach, I helped create a White student anti-racism group, which has become one avenue through which students can exercise their anti-racism activism.

### **The Professor as Therapist**

I am very aware of the degree of fear White students have regarding learning about White privilege and racism. Therefore, I consider the learning of this subject matter analogous to therapy. While therapy has innumerable benefits, these are only achieved at the cost of being confronted with aspects of ourselves we prefer not to acknowledge. When White students begin to examine White privilege and racism, a similar dynamic occurs. Students often begin to

feel guilty about the benefits they derive in U.S. society solely by virtue of their skin color (Tatum, 1992, 1994; Gillespie, Ashbaugh, & DeFiore, 2002). They feel badly about a part of themselves to which they had previously been blind, often expressing negative feelings about being White. One way in which I try to address this dynamic is by emphasizing that learning about White privilege and racism is not about White people being “good” or “bad.” I suggest that this learning is essentially about becoming aware of skin color privilege that has been bestowed upon us and, once we recognize that we benefit from this privilege, it can mobilize us to take action which helps to rectify inequities in our society.

Another frequent by-product of psychotherapy is that increased self-awareness often triggers changes in one’s interpersonal relationships. These changes can often result in confronting dysfunctional patterns of relating that, previously, were accepted as “normal,” even healthy. Once the individual becomes aware of the unconscious ways in which they have become intertwined in various relationships, conflict often ensues as the unhealthy dynamics are challenged. I have had White students voice similar concerns. They have mentioned feeling awkward discussing racism with their family, partners, and friends, describing a general feeling of discomfort in anticipation of the reaction they will receive in response to their newly acquired perspective. And, just as in therapy, when people often discontinue treatment just as they start to become aware of this potential discomfort within themselves and/or their relationships, some students seem to revert back to their original level of blindness as the fear generated by examining themselves and/or their relationships appears to be too great. Hence, they often hold on rather fiercely to their prior beliefs, as change appears to be too daunting. These therapy-like dynamics support the idea that a “safe space” (Tatum, 1992) needs to be created in the classroom, so that not only exploration of these emotional issues, but oneself as well, can be undertaken.

Resistance is another consequence of psychotherapy. Tatum (1992, 1994), Gillespie, Ashbaugh, and DeFiore (2002), and Rich and Cargile (2004) all discuss instances and types of student resistance, so some of what follows reiterates dynamics discussed by these authors. However, I hope it is still deemed worthwhile to identify these patterns of resistance. Due to my psychoanalytic orientation, I tend to consider a number of White students’ behaviors as resistance to discussing White privilege and racism, similar to that which

psychotherapy patients exhibit when they are feeling ambivalent or reluctant toward treatment. I have seen resistance among White students manifest in a variety of ways, and while I don’t always necessarily have specific “solutions” or techniques for handling it, simply understanding the student behavior as resistance allows me to keep my own impatience and frustration at bay.

Some examples of resistance among White students that I have encountered are:

- ◆ Sticking to an original point of view in the face of alternative evidence.
- ◆ Questioning the legitimacy of the authors (i.e., “How old is this stuff!?”).
- ◆ Denial (“I grew up in an all White town without racism,” “Some of my best friends are...”).
- ◆ Suggesting they are victims of other forms of oppression. For example, it is not uncommon that, when asked to discuss how White privilege and racism have affected their own lives, White students will often begin speaking about sexism or classism. While studying racism certainly does not preclude discussing other “isms” (quite to the contrary, I often will use examples of male privilege in order to make the connection for understanding White privilege), I have to be aware of the context in which these discussions arise. When White students are asked explicitly to consider how they might have engaged in racist thinking or behavior in their own lives and, instead, respond by citing how they are, in fact, victims of some other form of oppression, I see this as an attempt to exculpate themselves from feelings of guilt associated with being a member of a dominant group that has been associated with perpetrating oppression. Rich and Cargile (2004) use the term “diversion strategies” to describe this dynamic, citing examples of how White women will change the topic to feminist issues, gay and lesbian students will equate racism with homophobia, etc.
- ◆ Avoiding suggested experiential exercises, readings.
- ◆ Absence, lateness.

### Handling Resistance

As mentioned above, I am not always able to handle such resistance. However I

have developed a few methods of doing so which are listed below:

- ◆ I try to be aware of, and in touch with, my own anger, frustration, impatience, etc. that is elicited by some students (this is similar to the psychoanalytic concept of countertransference), reminding myself that I still maintain tacitly racist thoughts and am continuing to learn. It is important that I not engage in the same splitting and projection (making my students the target of my split off feelings) that I describe as common among Whites when exploring racism.
- ◆ I remind myself that the material might be triggering feelings of discomfort within the students.
- ◆ I try to consider some forms of resistance as a veiled form of interest. As mentioned earlier, some students might be struggling with ideas that challenge their existing worldview. To assume that they would easily and blindly change their point of view without some resistance is unrealistic.
- ◆ I try to remain aware of, and sensitive to, the fact that for some students accepting the existence of White privilege and racism means potential conflict with their family/friends.
- ◆ I assume that the idea expressed is not simply that of one individual, but held by many members of the class.
- ◆ I try to avoid arguing a point directly with a student. This only causes the student to withdraw, and silence those who agree with the sentiment. I would also suggest that students who do this are, unconsciously, trying to draw me in to a conflict because if I get angry or contentious, I then can be vilified as the “mean” professor whose message should be ignored.
- ◆ Not all student objections are resistance. However, the strategy of turning the objection into a question for group discussion also keeps me from becoming directly engaged in arguing with the student. This allows students to examine their underlying assumptions without feeling attacked.
- ◆ Occasional appropriate humor (laughing at myself) helps to ease the tension. I would warn that humor needs to be used with much discretion, for it is often used as a defense against feelings of discomfort. I would suggest against using humor until

one has accumulated a good amount of experience teaching this topic to White students.

### Student Reactions to the Subject

While I don't have any empirical data (a very Euro-American cultural tendency) to demonstrate student learning, there is quite a bit of anecdotal evidence that nicely reflects the way in which students react to and learn the material. The first assignment in the course is a reflection paper in which students are asked to apply the themes raised in both the *White Privilege* text (Rothenberg, 2002), the *Color of Fear* video and class discussions to their understanding of their own White privilege.

The comments in papers of a number of White students reflect a new understanding of White privilege and racism which, in turn, fostered a shift in their own racial awareness. The following are some excerpts.

Before taking this class I was never able to answer the question as "what makes someone White"? Even at this moment I have vague understandings of Whiteness. Perhaps this, in itself, is part of the answer. Whiteness is not talked about, it is just there. It is an almost unconscious acceptance of a created concept that is not even concrete, and is nearly impossible for most people to explain...I am a White person, and I define myself as such, and I don't have a clear answer as to what "Whiteness" is. This problem is reflected in every White person I know, and perpetuates such things as invisible White privilege and invisible White supremacy. (White female student)

At first I had not thought of myself as racist...I have learned that I was totally unaware that by not considering myself White I was committing a racist process. It would have been hard to say that, but I am proud now to know that I have had these thoughts and that I am in the position to change that, because I am consciously aware of myself, my perceptions, and how that affects others in my culture and in different cultures. (White female student)

Hello, I am a White American male, and I am racist...I feel much more comfortable calling myself racist where in the past I would never have considered ever thinking of myself as racist because now I see it differently. (White male student)

Another subtle way in which I have noticed that students are actively engaged in learning is through interactions I have had with students outside of class. For example, one White male approached me to talk about his mother's experiences in a social services agency. What seemed more important than the actual content of his story was the fact that he wanted to con-

vey that he appreciated the themes being discussed and wanted to make some sort of connection with me.

The following is an e-mail received from a White female student after attending a talk by Jamal Joseph, a former Black Panther, who was speaking at the college:

After class today I went the gym to meet my friend... for our routine workout, and he asked how class went and I simply told him that we went to see someone speak at our school who was a Black Panther...need I say more, I was cut off from my happy-I'm-feeling-great-because-I'm-challenging-the-world-kick and educating myself is exciting...and was smacked in the face by a bitter response, "I hate those racist bastards." Oh well, let's try to be nice about it, I thought. So naturally I questioned him and said, well why. "I'm just sick of people today going off on their racist pity and whatever those guys did was totally disgusting and really terrible. I've read a lot and know a lot of history about them, and what they did was bad." Well, from hearing what I heard today from Jamal, and having really only that positive exposure to it, I was taken aback.

I just wanted to thank you for exposing us to Jamal's presence (sic) and knowledge. There is so much out there that I'm striving to learn and to better myself by becoming more aware. I am very self-aware, but I'm learning to broaden that vision to what happens outside of my domain ... Today I realized that there is so much to learn and that there is so much to question. I've questioned a lot about my self-structure (sic) and what really makes me feel and believe what I have come to feel and believe. I ultimately want to understand I am very accepting of differences I learn about and am more than open-minded about wanting to explore more. I'm really enjoying this awakening, back to the social world. I haven't been here in a while and it's a bit of a shock, because like I said I've been questioning a lot of my foundations and am really learning a lot about myself. I just want to thank you in advance for offering as much knowledge as you have to all of us. This is really an honor to learn and explore and share with one another our experiences and thoughts.

### Conclusion

There are a variety of methods by which the themes of White privilege and racism can be presented to White students. By using the concept of racial identity a continuum of racism can be considered. Using such a continuum has allowed me, as a White instructor, to use myself as a model for the very concepts I attempt to teach, making it easier to deal with much of the anxiety inherent in learning about such themes.

Furthermore, addressing White privi-

lege and racism in the context of a multicultural psychology course allows White students to have a greater appreciation for the history and subjective experience of people of color in the United States, as this history has been irrevocably influenced by White culture.

Using a continuum of racism as a pedagogical tool has also allowed for the introduction of psychoanalytic group relations theory, helping students to think more critically about the misleading categories of "racist" and "non-racist."

Hopefully, the methods described will enable other White instructors of White students to more effectively deal with the resistance, often fueled by feelings of guilt and shame, that is typically encountered when teaching about White privilege and racism.

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