

Assessing the Learning of White Students on Themes of White Privilege & Racism

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Introduction

In an earlier article appearing in *Multicultural Education* (Volume 16, Number 1, Fall 2008) a number of pedagogical techniques were presented for teaching White students about White privilege and racism (Heinze, 2008). That article emphasized that racism exists along a continuum (see Figure 1 reproduced from that earlier article) and that the instructor needs to examine and disclose his or her own racism. Group exercises and an analysis of the film *The Color of Fear* were described as approaches that have proved successful. Additionally, a number of student dynamics, such as resistance to the material, were considered from a psychoanalytic perspective. Readers are encouraged to read that earlier article in order to more fully understand the different forms of pedagogy utilized.

With respect to the assessment of student learning in a Multicultural Psychology course, anecdotes and quotes from students were offered in the 2008 article as evidence, noting that there was an absence of empirical data (e.g., measurable learning outcomes). Since that time, there has been an opportunity to collect quantitative data, and this article presents findings related to student learning on a number of themes covered throughout the semester.

Methodology

The sample reported here included 104 undergraduate students from the Multicultural Psychology course who consented to

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participate in the research. Data were collected from five classes over a four-year period. On the first day of class, participants completed a demographic questionnaire (see Figure 2) and a self-report including ten 6-point Likert scale items addressing various themes relating to White privilege and racism (see Figure 3). At the end of a 15-week semester, students once again completed the self-report.

The self-report was constructed with attention to a number of the primary themes addressed during the semester, with some questions being rather direct and others somewhat obscure. For example, individual racism was addressed by items such as "I don't consider myself to be racist," White privilege was addressed by items such as "White people benefit from privileges that people of color do not," and institutional racism was addressed by items such as "Affirmative action results in minority groups receiving privileges which they did not earn" (with an answer of "False" indicating an acknowledgment of institutional racism).

Results

Since the study was concerned with the learning of White students, only those who identified as "White" were included in the analysis. Of the 104 students participating, 84 identified as White, 71 of whom

were female and 13 male. Of these, 79.8% indicated the community in which they were raised was "All White" or "Mostly White," while 20.2% indicated the community in which they were raised was "Mixed" (19%) or "Mostly people of color" (1.2%). With regard to combined household income, 39.2% were in the \$100,000+ range, 47.6% were in the \$50,000-to-\$99,999 range and 11.9% reported a household income of \$49,999 or less.

In order to avoid potential response set bias, items 6, 8 and 9 were worded so that a lack of awareness, or denial, of White privilege would result in responses endorsing the "False" end of the spectrum. All other questions were worded to reveal a lack of awareness, or denial of, White privilege by endorsing responses on the "True" end of the spectrum. In order to simplify data interpretation, items 6, 8 and 9 were reverse-scored prior to analysis.

With regard to the reliability of the 10-item self-report (see Table 1 for list of items), Cronbach's alpha was computed for Time 1 (beginning of the semester) and Time 2 (end of the semester). Of note, one item "Having a volunteer army is racist" was deleted from the computation of Cronbach's alpha, because it was a theme not consistently covered over the four years of data collection. Cronbach's alpha at Time 1 was .68 and at Time 2 was .77. One possible explanation for the increase in Cronbach's alpha over

Figure 1
Racism as a Continuum: Emphasis Is on Thoughts as Well as Behavior

Not Racist (Is it really possible to be "bias free"?)	Prejudice Bias Stereotyping (Thoughts, often unconscious)	Discrimination Segregation (Non Violent Behaviors, can include consciously racist thinking)	KKK Skinhead Neo-Nazi Hate Crime Perpetrator (Violent Behaviors)
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Figure 2
Demographic Questionnaire

Please enter your response in the space provided:

Gender: _____ Age: _____

Please circle the appropriate response:

I identify as: (a) A White person _____ or (b) A person of color _____

The community in which I was raised was:

(a) All White _____ (b) Mostly White _____ (c) Mixed _____ (d) Mostly people of color _____

(e) All people of color _____

My family's annual combined household income is approximately:

- Over \$200,000 _____
- \$100,000 - \$199,999 _____
- \$75,000 - \$99,999 _____
- \$50,000 - \$74,999 _____
- \$25,000 - \$49,000 _____
- \$15,000 - \$24,999 _____
- Below \$15,000 _____

time is that concepts and themes which, initially, might have appeared unrelated were eventually understood in a more complex and integrated manner. Hence, in this case, Cronbach's alpha at Time 1 might not necessarily have been an indicator of the reliability of the self-report, but rather a reflection of students' lack of knowledge of the material at the time.

To determine if demographic factors had any effect on responses to the self-report, a two-way multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted

revealing only one significant difference, that being on the item "Having a volunteer army is racist." However, group differences on this item were not explored in more detail since this theme was not continuously covered, being given much less exposure over time. Since this lack of even exposure is a source of statistical error, making any inferences about group differences would be speculative, at best. All other items revealed no differences on either Time 1 (beginning of semester) or Time 2 (end of semester) variables.

Paired samples T-tests were conducted for each of the items. All pairs revealed a significant difference between Time 1 and Time 2. Of particular interest Item 1, "I consider myself to be White," revealed a significant, albeit small, change (Time 1, $x=1.12$; Time 2, $x=1.30$; $p .05$).

Discussion

Of note, by the end of the semester, students revealed a change in beliefs on all items. This is encouraging for a number of reasons. The findings suggest that the various teaching methods presented (Heinze, 2008) resulted in student learning. For example, a greater shift to "True" in response to "White people benefit from privileges that people of color do not" suggests that students were effectively able to identify ways that White people benefit from un-earned privileges. It can be inferred that in order for this shift to take place, students' understanding of racism and White privilege were extended to a broader spectrum of attitudes and behaviors. This being said, what is unable to be determined is whether certain pedagogical techniques had more of an effect on learning than others and, if so, to what degree.

Also of note, the changes revealed between the beginning and end of the semester support the concept of racism existing along a continuum. For example, at the beginning of the course students

Figure 3
10-Item Self-Report Assessing Themes of White Privilege and Racism

Directions: Circle the number above the statement which most accurately reflects your thinking.

	True	Mostly True	Partly True	Partly False	Mostly False	False
(1) I consider myself to be White	1	2	3	4	5	6
(2) Affirmative action results in minority groups receiving privileges which they did not earn.	1	2	3	4	5	6
(3) I feel that people of color have really "made it" in our society and have equal access to everything that Whites do.	1	2	3	4	5	6
(4) Poverty is a more important issue than race.	1	2	3	4	5	6
(5) I don't consider myself to be racist	1	2	3	4	5	6
(6) White people benefit from privileges that people of color do not.	1	2	3	4	5	6
(7) In the past, many poor immigrant groups such as the Italians, Irish and Jews were able to work hard and struggle to obtain the American dream. I can't understand why African-Americans today can't do the same.	1	2	3	4	5	6
(8) I think African-Americans are justified in using American slavery as the reason for injustices today.	1	2	3	4	5	6
(9) Having a volunteer army is racist.	1	2	3	4	5	6
(10) In this day and age, a middle-class African-American family that moves into a predominantly White suburban town, should not expect to be victims of racism.	1	2	3	4	5	6

responded to the question “I don’t consider myself to be racist” with a mean of 1.64 (between “True” and “Mostly True”) and at the end of the course answered with a mean of 3.48 (between “Partly True” and “Partly False”), suggesting that, over time, an acknowledgment of one’s own racism occurred, revealing a shift in consciousness.

The idea of racism existing along a continuum, with incremental shifts in awareness, as opposed to it being conceptualized as a dichotomous construct (e.g., people are either racist or not), was presented as an important teaching point (Heinze, 2008). This is based on the assumption that if individuals are gradually able to locate racism in themselves (as opposed to identifying it only in those who they perceive as “racists”) it allows for a greater openness to appreciating concepts such as White privilege and its relation to racism. Hence, the change revealed in students acknowledging their own level of racism over the course of a semester is suggestive of this increased level of openness.

Such a change supports Helms’ (1993) White Racial Identity Development Model. In that model, it is suggested that individuals move through such stages as “Contact” and “Disintegration” and ultimately

can reach a stage of “Autonomy.” It is safe to suggest that, at a minimum, many students in this study shifted from the “Contact” to the “Disintegration” stage during the course of the semester. Along these lines, the change in the response to self-report item 1, “I consider myself to be White” (from 1.12 to 1.3) is noteworthy.

All students included in this analysis were given the choice on the demographic questionnaire to indicate whether they identified as “a White person” or “a person of color.” As mentioned, only those who identified as “White” were included in the study. The fact that, although predictably small, a shift away from this White identity was endorsed suggests that during the course of the semester some students began to question their White identity.

Although purely speculative, one can imagine that a bi- or multi-racial student might have experienced such an identity shift if, prior to the course, they identified as “White.” Alternatively, it is possible that a student who had an identity as a “White Latina/o” at the beginning of the semester might have also experienced a shift away from this identity over time. Regardless of what contributed to this shift, it certainly supports the idea that identity is, in great

part, a psychological phenomenon. It might be worthwhile for future research to include administration of Helms’ Model at the beginning and end of the semester in order to better assess such changes.

Limitations

There are limitations in this type of research, since quantitative analysis limits what can be inferred. For example, as mentioned, it would be a virtually impossible task to tease apart all the teaching methods presented (Heinze, 2008) in order to identify which might have had the greatest effect on student learning. The classroom is a dynamic environment with multiple levels of cognitive and emotional processing occurring on a constant basis. Additionally, individuals learn at varying rates and focus on different themes depending what is meaningful to them.

So, while for some students having a White instructor disclose his own racism might be most instrumental in comprehension, others might be more moved by viewing *The Color of Fear*, while yet others might be more influenced by the persuasive arguments of historical institutional racism presented in the text *White*

Table 1
Beginning and End of the Semester Self-Report Item Means

	Beginning of semester	End of semester	t	df
I consider myself to be White.	1.12 (.45)	1.30 (.94)	-1.95*	83
Affirmative Action results in minority groups receiving privileges which they did not earn.	3.90 (1.53)	4.66 (1.34)	-4.46***	81
I feel that people of color have really “made it” in our society and have equal access to everything that Whites do.	3.26 (1.47)	4.69 (1.26)	-10.44***	83
Poverty is a more important issue than race.	2.52 (1.15)	3.55 (1.45)	-6.66***	82
I don’t consider myself to be racist.	1.64 (1.06)	3.48 (1.24)	-12.04***	83
White people benefit from privileges that people of color do not. Item reversed-scored for data analysis	4.08 (1.36)	5.46 (.95)	-7.98***	82
In the past, many poor immigrant groups such as the Italians, Irish, and Jews were able to work hard and struggle to obtain the American dream, I can’t understand why African Americans today can’t do the same. Item reversed-scored for data analysis	4.14 (1.55)	4.69 (1.51)	-3.65***	83
I think African Americans are justified in using American slavery as the reason for injustices today Item reversed-scored for data analysis	2.85 (1.38)	3.38 (1.37)	-3.38***	83
Having a volunteer army is racist. Item reversed-scored for data analysis	1.64 (1.06)	2.87 (1.55)	-7.50***	77
In this day and age, a middle-class African-American family that moves into a predominately white suburban town should not expect to be victims of racism.	3.12 (1.62)	4.64 (1.37)	-8.56***	83

Note. * = p .05, *** = p .001. Standard Deviations appear in parentheses below means.

Privilege. As such, future assessments might include a section where students can offer a narrative describing what themes, exercises, or activities they feel were most influential in their learning and why. However, as described previously (Heinze, 2008), this is currently addressed to a certain degree with an assigned self-reflection paper in which students identify their White privilege and how it relates to racism. Often students use this paper as an opportunity to express what has been most instrumental in their learning.

Another limitation of such a quantitative analysis is the implication that learning occurs in a discrete manner (e.g., “Idea A was learned after 15 weeks”), ignoring the possibility that some of the themes might not result in learning until weeks, months, or years after students take the course. Material that seems fairly theoretical might only become meaningful after an individual has had more life experience. Moreover, addressing one’s own racism often generates resistance to the themes presented (Heinze, 2008). If the concept of resistance to the material is considered, it is quite possible that a phase of denial could occur for a period of time and only evolve into learning after experiencing an emotional event later in life which,

in turn, connects with themes presented in the course. Certainly such a process supports the construct of racial identity development (e.g., a shift to the “Pseudo-Independence” stage can be triggered as a result of a “painful or insightful encounter or event”).

Another limitation of this study is that “African American” was the only group specifically referenced in the self-report. Future research should include additional questions identifying groups such as Latino/a Americans, Asian Americans, and Native Americans, so that differences in degree and type of racism and perceptions of privilege can be analyzed. For example, for Item 7, “In the past, many poor immigrant groups such as the Italians, Irish, and Jews were able to work hard and struggle to obtain the American dream; I can’t understand why African Americans today can’t do the same,” Asian Americans might be perceived as being more similar to Euro Americans in terms of achieving the “American Dream” but yet still face many forms of racism. Hence, a more in-depth analysis of the relation between White privilege and racism and how it is manifest with regard to perceptions of various groups would be illuminating.

The majority of the sample used was

female, from an all-White or mostly-White neighborhood, and of reasonably high joint family income level. Future research should attempt to collect a more diverse sample with regard to gender and class, which might yield different results on items such as number 4, “Poverty is a more important issue than race.”

Despite such limitations, the present study has revealed quantitative evidence for the effectiveness of teaching White students themes regarding White privilege and its relation to racism.

References

- Heinze, P. (2008) “Let’s talk about race, baby”: How a White professor teaches White students about White privilege and racism. *Multicultural Education*, 16(1), 2-11.
- Helms, J. (1993). *Black and White racial identity*. Westport, CT: Praeger.