

Understanding Whiteness

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A Multicontextual Overview of Whiteness in Campus Climate

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Abstract

Whiteness is more than a racial identity. It is a concept that is deeply embedded into the structures and histories of many institutions of higher education. Due to the pervasiveness of Whiteness, institutions are likely to have campus climates that are hostile and unsupportive of students who identify as Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. Campus climate is comprised of multiple dimensions, and it is influenced by multiple contexts that are both internal and external to the institution. By examining these contexts, institutions can unearth the origins of Whiteness in their operations and examine the influence on campus climate.

Introduction

Whiteness is more than an identity; it is a systemic issue built into the bedrock of educational institutions in the United States. Prospective students from minoritized groups are met with resistance rooted in Whiteness during the admissions process, and the barriers do not end there. Many universities have histories of intentional exclusion of students who are Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC). Due to racial segregation, institutional processes have been customized to meet the needs of White students, which has ultimately resulted in racial privilege (Garces & Jayakumar, 2014). The most notable example is the University of Virginia, which was founded by President Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson was a proponent of equality in word but not in his actions. In addition to owning slaves, he mandated segregation in campus

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spaces to limit contact between White students and the enslaved Black workers who maintained the campus (Whitford, 2019).

Today, BIPOC students are still impacted by the racist histories of their institutions. BIPOC students are welcomed to campuses across the nation, yet they face a hostile college climate. White peers and faculty inflict psychological harm with microaggressions (Cabrera et al., 2017; Harper, 2015). White students use “affirmative action” as an attack that undermines the intellectual abilities of BIPOC students by questioning whether or not they earned their place on campus (Vue, Haslerig, & Allen, 2017).

While White members of the campus community are creating hostile environments for BIPOC students, they are also feeling challenged by interracial environments, likely due to a rudimentary understanding of race. Cabrera (2014) interviewed White male college students about their perceptions of racism, and four themes of Whiteness emerged in students’ responses. First, a majority of students defined racism as an individual issue rooted in hatred and perceptions of inferiority. Secondly, students had a tendency to minimize and dismiss BIPOC individuals who reported racism as a barrier to success. The students expressed that BIPOC individuals experienced racial inequality due to having values that did not support educational attainment or upward social mobility. Thirdly, the students believed that multicultural efforts resulted in “reverse racism” and that they had experienced racism from BIPOC students. Lastly, students felt like their college experience had a minimal influence on their racial views. In conclusion, Cabrera (2014) stated that understanding how White people perceive racism and racial privilege “provides insight into the process of hegemonic Whiteness formation” (p. 51).

Hegemonic Whiteness Formation

Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS) is an epistemology that identifies the social structures that support and recreate White hegemony (Cabrera, 2014). Cabrera et al. (2017) identified five interrelated concepts that are essential to understanding Whiteness in higher education: colorblindness, epistemologies of ignorance, ontological expansiveness, property, and assumed racial comfort. These concepts are simultaneously damaging to BIPOC students and beneficial to White students (Cabrera et al., 2017).

Colorblindness

Colorblindness stems from a perspective in which White people believe that racial inequality is no longer an issue in higher education (Williams, 2013). Proponents of colorblindness argue that diversity is divisive and

results in segregation so assimilation is more beneficial for the campus community (Williams, 2013). Colorblindness is problematic because it “amounts to a requirement that people of color become more White” (Bergerson, 2003, p. 53). Additionally, colorblindness creates a false vision of social harmony that reinforces Whiteness (Williams, 2013).

Epistemologies of Ignorance

Epistemologies of ignorance refer to the gap of understanding between the existing racial inequities and the persistence of White people to believe in colorblindness (Cabrera et al., 2016). By denying reality and demonstrating an unwillingness to learn, White people can “remain racially blissful” while systemic racism “remains uninterrogated and therefore remains in place” (Cabrera et al., 2017, p. 21).

Ontological Expansiveness

Ontological expansiveness refers to a sense of entitlement that White people have in terms of accessing space, whether it is a physical space on campus or a metaphorical space (Cabrera et al., 2017). Because minoritized groups are often numerical minorities on campus, the appearance and actions of BIPOC students attract attention in environments that support Whiteness (Williams, 2013). In comparison, White students do not consider their race when navigating campus environments, and in turn, they are not questioned about their whereabouts because their presence is considered the norm (Bergerson, 2003).

Property

Whiteness as property is a form of ownership that provides White people with permission to act freely while excluding BIPOC individuals (Cabrera et al., 2017). Harris (1993) explained that Whiteness as property began with slavery. Being White determined whether a person was free or enslaved, and if a person was free, they were guaranteed legal rights (Harris, 1993). Additionally, Harris (1993) stated “exclusion and racial subjugation” are the foundations of Whiteness, which increases its value due to exclusivity and associated privileges (p. 1737).

Assumed Racial Comfort

Maxwell and Chesler (2019) noted that issues of comfort are “often central to conversations about race and racism involving White people” (p. 250). Assumed racial comfort emerges in interracial dialogues in

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which White individuals are confronted because they have used dialogue, such as microaggressions, that is harmful to BIPOC students (Cabrera et al., 2017). Racial comfort is derived from a sense of entitlement in which White people do not want to engage in racialized conversations because it might make them feel uncomfortable (Cabrera et al., 2017; Maxwell & Chesler, 2019).

Campus Climate

Campus climate is the degree of inclusion that campus community members experience in their learning and professional environments (Williams, 2013). Williams (2013) stated that it is “crucial to examine the multiple dimensions of the campus climate” due to the “inherent complexity” of diversity (p. 280). Hurtado et al. (2012) established a multi-dimensional concept of campus climate that operates on two levels: the institutional and the individual.

Institutional Level

According to Hurtado et al. (2012), the institutional level of climate has three dimensions: the historical, organizational, and compositional. The historical dimension considers the legacy of exclusionary policies used by many institutions to maintain a White campus community. The organizational dimension covers institution policies, practices, and procedures that result in privilege and oppression. The compositional dimension is the numerical representation of privileged and minoritized individuals in the campus community.

Individual Level

The individual level of campus climate consists of the behavioral and psychological dimensions. Hurtado et al. (2012) described the behavioral dimension as the “context, frequency, and quality of interactions on campus” that occur either formally (facilitated by the institution through coursework and programming) or informally (chance occurrences) with members of different identity groups (p. 66). The psychological dimension refers to how individuals perceive interactions and the campus environment, which influences whether the climate is perceived as inclusive or hostile.

Researcher’s Positionality

My orientation to Whiteness and campus climate is influenced by

my identity as a White staff member and alumnus of the institution that will be analyzed in this article. Throughout my undergraduate education, I perceived the campus climate positively as a White, cisgender, heterosexual woman. However, the campus climate was not warm and welcoming during conversations where peers responded negatively to my dialect, which is part of my identity as an Appalachian from Eastern Kentucky. This type of backlash was not a new experience, but I was disappointed because the institution was designed to primarily recruit and serve students from the Appalachian region.

I was unaware of racial privilege at that time, but now I think about how my BIPOC peers perceived the campus climate and wonder about the extent of a misalignment between the institution's commitment to interracial education and their lived experiences as students. Now that I am a staff member, my goal is to identify and decentralize systems of Whiteness to ensure that BIPOC students feel physically and psychologically safe. This begins with being more observant during student interactions involving myself and my White colleagues to determine how Whiteness is being reinforced so that process can be stopped. Bergerson (2013) stated that White scholars should help other White people understand their racial privilege and how privilege is maintained. This work is one small step in applying CWS in daily campus life.

Purpose of the Research

Issues in higher education will persist until campus community members with privileged identities truly understand how institutions and individuals support and engage in behaviors that reproduce racial inequity. When allies want to stop being a part of the problem, they need to act from a place of informed understanding because common sense and a passion for diversity are insufficient when engaging in strategic diversity efforts (Williams, 2013). The purpose of this research is to examine the structures that maintain Whiteness in higher education by utilizing a multi-contextual framework to understand the dynamics that influence campus climate.

Framework

Rationale for Framework Selection

The perpetuation of Whiteness in campus climates will be examined using the Multicontextual Model for Diverse Learning Environments (DLE model) created by Hurtado et al. (2012). Hurtado et al. (2012)

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developed the DLE model to “emphasize the pervasiveness of climate, the contextual nature of the position of institution, the individual-level dynamics within institutions, and the outcomes for individuals and society” (p. 47). The DLE model was selected for this research due to the framework’s emphasis on the multiple contexts of campus climate. If contexts can be altered to decenter Whiteness, institutions will be able to cultivate diverse learning environments that promote an inclusive campus climate.

Contexts within the Institution

The institutional context is represented by the curricular and cocurricular contexts. The curricular context encompasses how students are impacted by the social identities of faculty as well as inclusive pedagogy and curriculum. The curricular context is mirrored by the cocurricular context, which includes campus-facilitated activities that take place outside of the traditional classroom and academic curriculum. The cocurricular context examines how students are impacted by the social identities and multicultural competencies of staff in addition to inclusive programming that is developed using best practices.

Processes

Processes are the results of the activities taking place inside of the curricular and cocurricular contexts. Processes are utilized by institutions to “advance both diversity and learning to achieve essential outcomes” for students (Hurtado et al., 2012, p. 83). Hurtado et al. (2012) identified socialization, validation, and community building as the most prominent processes that emerge from diverse learning environments. Socialization is teaching students the knowledge, skills, and competencies needed to promote equity and to succeed in a multicultural world. Institutions use validation to help students build their confidence and affirm their worth “through active fostering of academic and interpersonal development” (p. 86). Lastly, institutions build community to increase students’ sense of belongingness. Facilitating a sense of belongingness is especially important for students from minoritized groups as they are likely to experience a lower sense of belongingness (p. 86).

Contexts Outside of the Institution

Hurtado et al. (2012) stated that institutional dynamics are affected by contexts that are outside of college operation such as the sociohistorical, policy, and external commitments/community contexts. The sociohistorical

context looks at how institutions have been influenced by political and societal movements, economic conditions, and legal decisions. The policy context acknowledges that institutional operations are influenced by local, state, and federal educational policies and regulations. The community context considers the influence of the local community as well as extensions of the campus community, such as alumni and current students' parents. External commitments are "push-pull" factors, including personal obligations and family commitments, that may support or detract from students' college experience (Hurtado et al., 2012, p. 93).

Analysis

The analysis of Whiteness in campus culture will begin by reviewing the contexts outside of the institution. That review will be followed by an examination of the contexts that operate within the institution. From there, the analysis will look at the dimensions of climate as they are pervasive in the curricular and cocurricular contexts (Hurtado et al, 2012). The analysis of the framework will conclude with implications and recommendations for institutions who need to develop inclusive campus climates. To provide consistent examples, the DLE model will be applied to Berea College (BC), a small, private liberal arts institution in the southeastern United States.

Review of the Multicontextual Levels

One of the main tenets of BC's mission is interracial education and equality. Throughout the institution's history, this mission has been compromised due to external events and movements occurring in the local community, state, and country. Beginning with the community context, there has been a tense relationship between the institution and the local community. For example, local citizens sometimes organize "parades" where they drive around the college campus while flying the Confederate flag out of their vehicles. In addition to displaying this symbol of white supremacy, some citizens have shouted slurs and thrown objects at students to inflict harm.

However, the community context also includes groups with external connections to the college, such as "friends of the college", who are people who believe in the mission and donate money to assist college operations. Donor funded initiatives include programming that facilitates interracial dialogue in the campus community as well as an initiative that provides coursework and programming customized to first-year Black male students. The community context has a mixture of factors that create an inclusive campus climate whereas some factors create hostility.

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Along with the community context, students have external commitments that influence their college experience. These commitments may be personal or related to students' families and local communities. One external commitment that has mostly affected Latinx students is fear of immigration status for their loved ones. Latinx students who are DACA-mented have worried about family members and friends who are undocumented due to raids from immigration officials. While the relationship between external commitments and campus climate are still unclear, according to Hurtado et al. (2012), pull factors are important to recognize because they place additional stress on students.

Whiteness has had deleterious effects on BC in the first 100 years of its history. The sociohistorical context of BC is its status as the first interracial college in the southern United States, which caused tension with locals who were pro-slavery. The founder and faculty of BC were threatened by the locals and were eventually forced out of town in 1859, and they did not return until the Civil War had ended (Berea College, n.d.-c). During the war, BC's founder worked at a refugee camp that served escaped and freed slaves (Berea College, n.d.-c).

The policy context was impacted by white supremacy when Kentucky passed the Day Law, which prohibited interracial education from 1904 until 1950 (Berea College, n.d.-b). In response to the Day Law, BC used funds from its endowment to establish an all-black institution. After the Day Law was struck down in 1950, the first Black student to graduate in the wake of this law completed her degree in 1954. The sociohistorical and policy contexts of BC demonstrate a legacy that has been relentless in the pursuit of racial justice despite adversity from white supremacy.

The institutional context of BC is understood through the curricular and cocurricular contexts. One aspect of the curricular context is the General Education program (GE). In terms of race, the GE intends to impart knowledge of BC's "historical and ongoing commitments to racial (traditionally Black and White [people]) and gender equality" and to develop habits of mind that develop appreciation of diversity, promotion of peace and justice, and the consideration of issues from multiple perspectives (Berea College, n.d.-a). The GE has developed a curriculum that promotes in-depth study of racial equality through a series of writing seminars, convocations, and active learning experiences.

One aspect of the cocurricular context is programming offered across the various centers that are dedicated to interracial learning. BC has the bell hooks Institute, Black Cultural Center, Center for International Education, and the Carter G. Woodson Center for Education. These centers have inclusive programming that covers topics such as interracial dialogue, global connections, racial equality, and oppression. However, while the curricular and cocurricular contexts have inclusive efforts, the main issue

with both contexts is that the racial diversity of staff and faculty does not match the demographics of the highly diverse student population.

Review of Campus Climate Dimensions

Now that the multiple contexts of BC have been examined, the dimensions of campus climate are the next concepts to consider. For each dimension, some questions and considerations will be provided that will help institutions develop a better understanding of the historical, organizational, and compositional dimensions of climate. When examining the climate of higher education institutions, review the history of the campus. Did the institution only serve White students? Was the institution impacted by societal movements and policies that excluded BIPOC students?

When looking at the organizational dimension of climate, review the policies and structures that outline the procedures for student admissions as well as the selection and promotion of employees. Are these policies prohibiting the advancement of racially minoritized groups? The compositional dimension is the easiest to measure because it is based on the numerical representation of groups. However, the racial composition of institutions is likely influenced by the complexity of the sociohistorical, policy, and community contexts.

The individual level of climate is manifested in the behavioral and psychological dimensions. To understand the behavioral dimension, ask students about their formal and informal interracial interactions on campus. For both types of interactions, how did students perceive those interactions? Were the interactions welcoming or hostile? It is particularly important to learn about the behavioral and psychological experiences of BIPOC students as White students are likely missing critical elements that support Whiteness due to ontological expansiveness and property. Also, see if White students are shying away from interracial interactions to protect their assumed racial comfort.

Implications and Recommendations

After working through the DLE model, it is important to consider the implications for Whiteness concepts. For a campus climate to be inclusive, colorblindness, epistemologies of ignorance, ontological expansiveness, property, and assumed racial comfort need to be addressed. The institutional processes of socialization, validation, and creation of a sense of belonging should be used to diminish Whiteness. All students need to feel safe in all campus spaces, whether it is classrooms, cocurricular centers, or residence halls. Additionally, centers that are designed to

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serve specific racial groups should not be the only places where BIPOC students feel comfortable. The curriculum and co-curricular programming need to address colorblindness and epistemologies of ignorance as well as challenge White students to step away from assumed racial comfort.

It is recommended to develop strategic diversity plans that intentionally remove Whiteness as the norm in campus operations. One way to do that is to assess the current campus climate by surveying and interviewing students about their experiences. Williams (2013) declared: “Addressing campus climate is a necessary component of any strategic diversity plan. To provide a foundation for a vibrant and collegial learning community, the academic institution must help foster a climate that cultivates diversity and celebrates difference” (p. 280). Fostering a climate that values diversity and difference is a rejection of colorblindness and refutes epistemologies of ignorance.

While many institutions have histories centered in Whiteness, all institutions should strive to have legacies of inclusion. While some contexts such as history cannot be changed, institutional reactions to exclusive histories and policies are a start to rectifying those wrongdoings that have excluded BIPOC students. Institutions need to be deliberate in their dismantling of Whiteness to create inclusive campus climates. This intentional focus on undoing Whiteness will likely make White members of the campus community uncomfortable at times. However, a few tense moments for White people pale in comparison to the hundreds of years of oppression that have barred BIPOC individuals from accessing higher education and having a positive educational experience.

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