One Black, One White

Power, White Privilege, & Creating Safe Spaces

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Introduction

This article explores the experiences of two professors as they teach about White privilege in predominately White institutions of higher education. The authors discuss how racial potentiality shapes the classroom climates of each of the professors and then present strategies that utilize safe spaces to navigate students away from the resistance they feel for this topic.

The two professors discuss examples that demonstrate how White privilege creates resistance in the courses they teach when they confront students with it as a real phenomenon (Johnson, 2001). At first, the professors worked in isolation, where their frustrations built up until they had an opportunity to share their experiences and realize that they teach similar content (e.g., manifestations of racism, discrimination, heterosexism, White privilege, and social construction of race and identity development theory), use many of the same texts, and that most of their students are from similar backgrounds.

We believe that based upon the professors positionalities as women—Diane, African American; Sheila, European American—the resistance to White privilege that had emerged from their classrooms assumed different tones. In fact, they were unknowingly expressing the ideas of Ringrose (2007), who asked, "How are the pain-filled contradictions surrounding power, positionality and identity in classroom engagements with racism and sexism negotiated for differently positioned subjects?" (p. 328).

In this article we share their experiences of teaching White privilege in predominantly White institutions and explore how we believe their raced positionality brings different reactions in the classroom. Additionally, we present how this positionality shapes their respective instruction, pedagogy, interactions with students, and classroom climate, as well as the power dynamics that emerge within the classes (Maher & Tetreault, 1993; Tisdell, Hanley, & Taylor, 2000).

We tell their stories of encountering resistance, present pedagogical implications, and share some of the strategies we find helpful in developing what we call "safe spaces." At the end, we separate and share a Black and White perspective as well as strategies we believe have increased the ability to engage in critical discussions of White privilege.

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White Privilege as a Threshold Concept

Meyer and Land (2003) describe a threshold concept as "troublesome knowledge and knowledge that is conceptually difficult" (p. 1). After years of reflection, we have found that the majority of students experience the concept of White privilege as foreign and uncomfortable. They have often been raised in families who believe in the American ideal of a meritocracy (Steinberg, 1989), and their personal experiences (or lack of experiences) have instilled the belief that racial inequality is no longer a problem, or they believe we are in a post racial society, especially with the election of President Barack Obama.

When race and racism are first introduced through the concept of White privilege and the idea that "all Whites benefit from racism" (Tatum, 1997, p. 12), the general reaction is, "Tatum is calling all White people racist, and I am not a racist." At this point, we have seen learning shut down; we have observed crossed arms and eye rolling.

White privilege is a threshold concept in such courses. Discussions illuminate a philosophical goal of helping students understand the relationship between White privilege, their personal lives, and systemic inequality, so that an exploration of other forms of institutionalized discrimination has a foundation upon which to build understanding. Similar to the work of Nichols (2010) we believe students cannot engage in discussions of critical White pedagogy without first engaging in an understanding of Whiteness. As Terry stated, "To be White in America means not having to think about it" (as cited in Johnson, 2001, p. 25).

Based on resistance initially received from teaching such courses, the two professors made a conscious effort to introduce their students to White privilege using the works of a "White woman like them," Peggy McIntosh. When they introduce White privilege, they ground it first in McIntosh (1988), who described it as "an invisible package of unearned assets ... like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools and blank checks" (pp. 3-4).

According to Gorski (2011), "Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack" recognized that White privilege was not a new concept but what the work of McIntosh did was "plant the concept firmly into the mainstream 'diversity' lexicon" (para. 5) and create a discussion so White people became "intrigued enough by the knapsack not to dismiss it" (para. 5).

The two professors used McIntosh's article because she outlined specific experiences of people of color in a context many of their students can relate to, considering many of them lack the theoretical foundations in White privilege. The two professors agree with Gorski (2011) that instructors who use McIntosh need to recognize it as an introductory tool and not stop there. After introducing the concept and before embarking onto how this privilege opens the ideology of intersectionality, they draw

on various authors of White privilege (i.e., Howard, 2006; Johnson, 2001 Kendall, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1994). To do so, however, they concur with Rose and Paisley (2012) that such study requires that students begin with an understanding of their relationship to White privilege.

The introduction of White privilege "generates powerful emotional responses in students that range from guilt and shame to anger and despair" (Tatum, 1992, pp. 1-2). The professors' students use personal stories to alleviate their guilt. Students have expressed that they retreat into silence because they feel guilt: "I felt guilty for being White, so I simply chose not to say anything." The professors discovered that to move the students from the guilt phase, they were trying to help students "increase knowledge about their participation in race relations," not just engage in discussions about race (Leonardo, 2009, pg. 107).

The two professors both confronted students with the ideology of White privilege in order for them to come to an understanding of Whiteness and begin to move from the guilt phase. If they were unable to move the students they would see feelings of guilt manifest in their classrooms. They often observed students retreating into denial. Many challenged with personal stories: "My family came to America with nothing," "Some of these listed [in McIntosh] are just ridiculous," or "I am working my way through college, and I can't apply for those scholarships."

What the two professors know is that many of their students cannot see beyond the personal stories because they have no prior experience other than those anecdotes. They recognize if we cannot move our White students beyond the guilt phase they will "become overconcerned with whether or not they 'look racist' and forsake the more central project of understanding the contours of structural racism" (Leonardo, 2004, p. 140).

Because the two professors both approach White privilege as a threshold concept, this ideology serves as the foundation for later course work. Once the central idea has been explored the course can then expand to encompass the current White privilege scholarship grounded in the ideas of intersectionality as opposed to only one of the social privileges (Gorski, 2011). After introducing the concept of White privilege, they view the next step as moving students beyond the guilt feeling and into acceptance of their relationship to White privilege and their role in perpetuating inequities in the classroom, in order to move toward forming what Nichols (2010) calls a "positive, antiracist White identity" (p. 5).

Ineffective Strategies

How can teachers personalize White privilege and try to make it real for White students who had few or no interactions with people of color? An answer to this question did not emerge from the way the two professors initially taught their courses. They had embarked on their teaching careers believing it was critical for students to understand race relations from both a historical and contemporary perspective. Lectures dominated their teaching style, coupled with periodic group discussions to communicate theories and critical data, especially as they related to race, racism, prejudice, and discrimination.

Even before they met, they both used the book *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* (Tatum, 1997) as the focal text to expose students to concepts such as Whiteness and oppression, and they both devoted significant class time to the definition of racism as a system of advantage and how this system is beneficial for White people in the United States (Tatum, 1997).

When the course content shifted to the relationship between White privilege and racial injustice, their classroom dynamics also shifted. Behavior and responses indicated major discomfort for many students in both of their classes. In one of Diane's classes, a male student pointedly explained that his parents had worked hard for their wealth and asserted, "This is America, where everyone has the opportunity to succeed." She responded by explaining how race historically has been used as a determining factor for access to resources, opportunities, status, power, and privilege, and how contemporary American society continues to provide unearned privileges to white people (McIntosh, 1988). She shared the ideas of Paul Kivel (2005) who points out the power that is derived from being identified by society as White. Many of the students shut down. In response, she lectured more to fill in the silence. Both professors discovered that they reacted to the resistance in the same way even though their students' resistance was not the same.

Diane documented students' emotional reactions in course evaluations:

> White people were always blamed . . . Very condescending attitude to students. . . . We weren't allowed to bring up points about whites. . . . Many closed down in fear of being attacked by classmates and professors. . . . Often has a comeback to any view we have . . . Many leave class upset . . .

Her students expressed, " … I feel it is not safe to share my opinion," and in return, Diane retreated into didactic, inactive, unengaged pedagogy with students as passive receptors of knowledge.

Because Shelia is White, the resistance was not a reaction to her race, but rather in the students' perception because the readings she gave them labeled all White people racist. Sheila entered her predominantly White classroom after teaching in a predominantly Black high school and did not understand her students' isolation. Her inability to understand their segregated backgrounds and resistance led to sarcastic needling as pedagogy. Student resistance continued for years.

In retrospect, some student reactions were not exactly pushing back against the idea of White privilege. The two professors now believe the pushback was a response to their inability to understand that the students' resistance was rooted in a lack of awareness, experience, knowledge, and vocabulary to voice their misunderstanding. The students simply had never been given the tools to understand. The professors grounded their teaching in assumptions of prior knowledge that the majority of the White students simply did not have. Some remained silent, while others were afraid of offending, especially in Diane's classroom. The professors now know they did not possess the tools for the critical, intellectual discussion they were asking for, and when they did not get the desired results, the professors countered the silence by dominating the discussions and imposing their power positions on the students.

In time, the two professors' collaborative reflections determined that they needed to understand rather than blame the students for their inability to talk about race. They embarked on creating safe spaces for their students to gain the necessary skills for intellectual discourse on systemic issues of White privilege.

Effective Strategies

The two professors discovered that what works for one of them is not necessarily ideal, or sometimes even possible, for the other person, due to class size, access to physical space, and positionality. The strategies implemented have created learning environments for open discussion

of White privilege in their classes. They have the same goal: to create a classroom where the climate is conducive for student growth so that students can move toward critically understanding that the enemy in our classrooms is dominance and not White people (Howard, 2006).

Creating Constructive Learning Environments or "Safe Spaces"

Safe spaces are classroom environments where students feel secure and empowered to engage in civil, honest, critical, and challenging dialogues about sensitive issues. In such classrooms, students feel secure to express their individuality or perspectives without reason for any backlash that could cause emotional, physical, or psychological harm (Holley & Steiner, 2005). Diane's initial serendipitous change was grounded in recognizing the intimidation factor her students felt from having an instructor of color teaching in the front of the classroom in a position of power and "accusing" them of profiting from racial dominance.

This realization led her to change the physical space of her class to address issues of power. In contrast, Sheila discovered that when she informed her classroom about the White privilege that brought them together as powerful oppressive racists, her classroom became "chilly" with silence. Her students did not know how to call themselves "White" and had been taught not to call other people "Black." She changed her power dynamics by turning to online discussions for assistance in creating a safe space. Both strategies are effective; they just work differently. The two teachers' different racial positionalities inform the dynamics of the chosen classroom space.

Diane: Introducing White Privilege by First Changing the Physical Community

By positioning herself as an African-American professor, Diane recognizes and acknowledges the rhetoric of "safe space" for professors of color. A question she always asks is if she has the power to create a safe space (Kyoko & Mwangi, 2009) for White students who "mirror" the power relations within society and enter her classroom with White privilege?

Before introducing the concept of White privilege, her first major classroom change was to move from a traditional lecture-based classroom to a circular, community setting by a fireplace in a campus center. She believed the shift to a less formal classroom setting balances the power dynamics by—at least visually—by changing her power position. The change enhanced student comfort, confidence, and willingness to engage in course activities.

Diane believes the image of an African-American professor comfortably sitting with legs crossed on a couch with students to her left and right projects a more relaxed image. She feels students see this as stark contrast to the initial misconception of Diane having been unhappy and mad at them (stereotypically, the Angry Black Woman [ABW], Walley-Jean, 2009).

In this setting, Diane discovered that she looked forward to going to class. Her students began to initiate discussion questions, ask more challenging questions, and shared personal experiences, especially those relating to their roles in perpetuating White privilege. These "fireside chats" transformed a tense learning community into what students describe in subsequent course evaluations as "open discussion in a relaxed climate," "very relaxed atmosphere," "free to offer opinions," or "very comfortable setting."

Initially, Diane was ambivalent about teaching in a classroom setting as relaxed as that described above, but it dawned on her that her comfort level, or "protective shield" was the board/computer screen or PowerPoint presentation. She found that this new format gave her permission to be vulnerable.

According to Kyoko and Mwangi (2009), "By teaching vulnerably, we not only challenge students to come out of their comfort zones and embrace their fears, but also ask them to trust us with their intellectual possibilities and their emotional and ideological uncertainties" (p. 96). Diane's ambivalence was replaced with confidence, and her vulnerability turned to strength as she allowed her students to see her racialized self within a classroom of White students. This change within the classroom space empowered her to foster a safe learning environment, which in turn becomes more conducive for examining the critical race-related readings in which she engages students.

As an African American of Nigerian ethnicity, the fireside chats empower Diane to share personal stories about her life, Nigerian dialect, and upbringing, which is key to breaking down some barriers. A student once innocently responded, "Oh, that is why you pronounce certain words different from 'us'." She has learned not to question the meaning of "us" or its implication of privilege of ownership to a specific dialect when she realized that at this juncture, students did not yet possess the knowledge base for understanding language privilege. At this point, understanding and being sensitive to prior knowledge and recognizing that learning gradually builds are keys to maintaining the safe space. When students ask her to say a few sentences in her indigenous language, Yoruba, she interprets the request as another layer of comfort and reduction in perceived power.

In this context, it is critical to note that we are not recommending that changing the physical structure of the classroom is sufficient to dismantling the resistance associated with teaching about White privilege. We emphatically assert that among others, it involves intellectual safety where professors are civil, respectful of students' varied identities, engaging self and students to disclose, and reflective while maintaining a "sense of control and direction to offer facilitate learning" (Schrader, 2004, p. 96).

It also requires selecting culturally diverse readings that students are able to relate to in terms of their multiple identities (Lee & Johnson-Bailey, 2004). After years of using a variety of multicultural readers, Diane now uses *The Education of a WASP* by Stalvey (1989). She considers this inclusion essential because Stalvey—a White, middle class, suburban woman—shares experiences of White privilege from a historical White perspective.

Using Stalvey's story, Diane has students pull examples from the text of 1960s White privilege that still persist in present-day society. One example Stalvey (1989) discussed was how people of color were omitted in the 1960s from school textbooks. This allows Diane to explore with students how they studied Susan B. Anthony and Henry Ford but not Sojourner Truth and Garrett Morgan. Diane's goal is for them to arrive at the conclusion of how the school curriculum as a tool has been used to reinforce White dominance. In reaction, one of her students noted, "I feel that it is what we are not taught that is creating this White privilege, or for that matter, creating a sense of unbalance among races and cultures."

To explain a raced system of advantage and privilege and how it has systematically oppressed people of color in the United States, Diane shares personal stories from *The Education of a WASP* (1989). Despite the historical setting of the text, the self-analysis of the author resonates with the

White students at a personal level Diane simply cannot achieve as a Black woman. At this point, many students begin to connect emotionally, feel guilty, and attempt to distance themselves from White privilege without knowing how to do so. She chooses the reading so that she can move students beyond the guilt some feel because of their ancestry.

It is important to state that this is a strategic effort to use a text that explores institutional racism, discrimination, and White privilege from a historical point of view, providing students a foundation upon which they might build their understanding of White privilege in present-day society. Using Stalvey (1989) as a companion with McIntosh leads students to understand how White privilege still pervades our current society.

Sheila: Building an On-line Community

As a White professor in a predominantly White classroom, Sheila recognizes that she is already in a safe space for opening difficult dialogues. She believes she falls into what Frankenberg (1993) refers to as race cognizance and recognizes "the complexities of context, the ways in which race can interact with socio-economic status to predetermine in advance the meanings and realities of one's identity and experiences" (p. 241). Sheila has come to realize it is not her knowledge that creates the dissonance; it is the incompatibility of her knowledge with her students' lack of knowledge that interferes with the safe space.

It was years before Sheila realized she blamed her students for their lack of knowledge instead of understanding it. The work of Gillespie, Ashbaugh, and DeFiore (2002) gave her insight into the resistance she faced from her White students as well her the sense of not being alone. To help her students fully understand their individual and collective roles in White superiority and its perpetuation (Kendall, 2006), Sheila realized the need to drop her blaming approach and create understanding as the foundation of the class's safe space.

After years of opening class by confronting students immediately with their Whiteness and their privilege, Sheila decided to ease into White privilege by first giving students the language they needed to enter into the conversation. Realizing her students, like those encountered by Kivel (2002) who "…don't want to be White because it opens us up to charges of being racist and brings up feelings of guilt, shame, embarrassment, and hopelessness" (p. 8), needed the language to voice their arguments openly so that they could be confronted. Her students have been engrained to be "colorblind" and express discomfort with using color-conscious language (McLellan, 2006).

Research has suggested (Apple, 1993; Giroux, 1993; Kivel, 2002; Marx, 2006) that language carries connotations that are both negative and positive. To alleviate the negative connotations attached to color-conscious language, Sheila has the class generate a list of historically underrepresented groups in America. As simplistic as this may appear, this grew out of questions from students about Black versus African American, Hispanic versus Latina/o, and Native American, American Indian, and Indian. It is not that students do not want to engage in the conversation, but their lack of prior knowledge and belief that mentioning race is racist makes the conversation uncomfortable. The discomfort leads to silence, and consequently, the students simply do not engage.

Differing in her approach from Diane, Sheila attempted to equalize the power by giving students the tools, or the vocabulary, and a safe space through online discussions to ask their questions and make their arguments. She believes that learning ways to talk openly about race leads students to transferring those skills to asking questions about White privilege.

Sheila stumbled onto online work as a safe space when her university asked for a hybrid section of multicultural education to give students greater access to a variety of learning opportunities. Although she approached the new format hesitantly, Sheila discovered students were more actively engaged in online discussions of White privilege than during in-class discussions, especially when she remained silent. Sheila believes transitioning from the traditional lecture to a more interactive student-focused pedagogy is grounded in the philosophical ideas of Freire (1983) and involves students in their learning through formulating their own ideas, as opposed to teacher talk.

Recent research into the creation of online classroom communities supports this format as an ideal place for the introduction and discussion of White privilege (Baker, 2010; Engstrom, Santo, & Yost, 2008). Although research supports participation of faculty in online discussions for community building (Young & Bruce, 2011), and because of these power dynamics, Sheila has chosen to stay out of online discussions, believing it requires students to take ownership of their learning. Sheila believes that when she participates, she notes a shift in the discussion, with student posts becoming less honest and more vague. She also believes required class participation makes it impossible for a student to "hide behind" their more verbal peers, letting them take control of the discussion. Reading the online discussions allows Sheila to process student resistance prior to face-to-face discussion. Some defensive posts by students have included, "What about Native privilege?" and "I am so tired of being made to feel guilty for something I have no control over."

According to Lally and Barrett (1999), online communities foster "a sense of connectedness, deeper exchange of ideas, freedom to engage in disagreements [and] increased risk taking" (p. 7). The honest, deeper exchange of ideas allows Sheila to evaluate student knowledge, student resistance, and student processing of White privilege to prepare better for in-class discussions. An example occurred in a Multicultural Education summer course when students brought that extreme hostility to the idea of White privilege. Examples of posts with resistance include, "I would have to say that most of the 'privileges' stated are untrue," and "This professor insulted me and my ethnic heritage."

This particular class also had two Latinas who rarely talked in class, but were quite expressive through the online format, sharing personal stories of White privilege. An example of one of their online posts is, "I do agree with some of the statements by Peggy McIntosh because I have experienced situations where some of her statements are real and still occurring today." Overall, student response was inquisitive but positive. In class, the Latinas remained silent, but their voice in the online discussions helped Sheila break through the class resistance by bringing real stories to the conversation that, as a White person, she could not share. The online community became a safe learning environment for the students that the classroom was not, and the opportunity to engage an in-depth conversation improved the learning environment for all students.

Conclusion

We have learned that resistance is inherent when instructors expose many White, mid-Western students with limited background knowledge to the concept of White privilege.

Although their races differ, the two professors both encountered denial and resistance when introducing White privilege and have learned to respond by creating safe spaces to guide students to understanding White privilege on the micro and macro levels. A key to deconstructing resistance is an understanding of faculty positionality and a willingness to engage in strategies unique to that positionality. Breaking down the resistance encountered upon the introduction of White privilege into a predominately White classroom is linked to power position and the race of the faculty.

We have outlined two major changes they made in power dynamics that increased their ability to be effective in confronting predominately White students with White privilege. We firmly believe educators must be flexible in creating change and value classroom spaces where learning is safe for all. Shifting power dynamics and creating safe spaces for both students and faculty can lead to empowering pre-service teachers and open, honest, and critical conversations around white privilege, systemic oppression, and institutionalized racism.

Although students leave these two professors' classrooms mired in questions, we believe the strategies implemented from their differing racial positions give students beginning skills to move beyond the bottlenecks created though the introduction of the threshold concept of White privilege. Students are beginning to look beyond their personal experiences and at the larger systemic issues that impact on education and society.

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