

RACIST FACEBOOK EVENT AGAINST NATIVE AMERICANS: PRESERVICE TEACHERS EXPLORE ETHICAL AND CRITICAL MULTICULTURAL IMPLICATIONS

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ABSTRACT

This exploratory case study sought to analyze data from Collaborative Learning Modalities (Brantmeier, Aragon & Folkestad, 2011) on-line threaded discussions in a teacher education course where pre-service teachers examined the nature of a Facebook event revealing unethical and racist notions against Native Americans. In 2010 a university student posted a Facebook event titled, "Cowboys vs. Indians" inviting fellow students to wear "Indian headdress" to rouse team spirit for a rival basketball game. This Facebook event stimulated commentary from many university students decrying Native Americans. Participants in this study believed unethical racism was present in this event because of the prolific nature of on-line communication where offensive statements and ideas were cruelly exposed about Native Americans. Such offensive ideas asserted against Native Americans were performed under a false sense of anonymity or autonomy. Yet anonymity was revealed by the media and such information was exposed displaying unethical behavior to a large unanticipated audience.

Keywords: Critical Multicultural Education, Native Americans, Facebook, Ethical, Social Networking, Pre Service Teachers, Racism.

INTRODUCTION

In early 2010 a student from a land grant university in the west posted a Facebook event titled, "Cowboys vs. Indians" inviting students to wear "Indian headdress" to rouse team spirit and support for the home team for a rival basketball game. One team would wear Cowboy attire while the other team would wear Indian attire; however, the Indian attire had nothing to do with the home team mascot. This Facebook event was not an official university sanctioned event. The student creating the Facebook event claimed no ill intent, yet the controversy became heated when offensive Facebook commentary from many university students decried Native Americans. School administrators issued a statement condemning the Facebook event and scheduled a meeting to discuss the incident with the creator of the event, Native American campus groups, and students.

This exploratory case study examines meaning derived through in-class discussions as well as Collaborative Learning Modalities (CLM) (Brantmeier, Aragon & Folkestad,

2011). CLM (Brantmeier, et al., 2011) includes an opportunity for students to supplement face to face conversations about such critical multicultural topics as the "Cowboys and Indians" Facebook event that occurred during and extended to engaging threaded discussions in an asynchronous on-line learning environment. On-line CLM (Brantmeier, et al., 2011) offers an alternative space for dialogue where students may examine a systems approach to learning by focusing on ideas that extend to the larger institutional and societal levels of critical multicultural issues and intertwine their individual knowledge into this larger frame of reference. CLM (Brantmeier, et al., 2011) assists with any cognitive overloads occurring from deep in-class discussions of systemic issues by allowing students the time to reflect and ruminate on such topics. This paper presents pre-service teachers' CLM threaded discussions of systemic critical multicultural notions related to ethical uses of Facebook.

Studies of social networking among college students have primarily focused on general usage, frequency and

popularity of such sites as Facebook (Pempek, et al., 2009). College students surveyed from several universities show that the use of social networking is universal (Pempek, et al., 2009). College students using Facebook display expressions of their identity related to their emerging adulthood, such as religious and political ideology, and ideas of work and school. At times, some adolescents self-disclose unwise postings or revelations about themselves "possibly making themselves vulnerable to embarrassment, censure, damage to one's name or reputation, or even victimization by others" (Patchin & Hinduja, 2010, p. 1818). Some users of social networks have a perceived feeling of anonymity and sometimes will portray their thoughts or ideas in a way that they would not portray in face to face (FtF) communication. This sense of anonymity is called autonomy, and it "involves the chance to experiment with new behaviors without fear of social consequences. Individuals can use their anonymity to almost become a different person without fear of being identified and negatively evaluated by those they know. This factor may lead to an extreme sense of freedom for the individual and allow him or her to engage in behaviors typically disapproved of by others without fear of the consequences that may ensue as a result" (Christopherson, 2007, p. 3041). Whether one has perceived or true anonymity, it can bring out people's worst attitudes, beliefs and values. One study by Coffey and Woolworth (2004) showed negative anonymous posts portrayed in an on-line newspaper forum after a White male was beaten to death by Hispanic and Black teenagers in Tacoma, Washington. The newspaper set up an on-line discussion board to foster understanding of such a crime in the community, yet the study revealed much hateful and angry commentary along with racist views against the assailants. This forum was unmonitored and people expressed extreme viewpoints. It was concluded that people will display argumentative views of anger, frustration and racist commentary when there is no fear of reprisal or their identity exposed.

The above example of racial tension occurring in an on-line forum explicitly displays interactions of attitudes, beliefs and values people hold related to race based incidents. Since the concept of race is a social construction of our

society (Spring, 2010; Nieto & Bode, 2011), on-line interactions still produce ways for people to explore and discuss racial constructs through on-line communication. On-line interactions may reinforce this social construction. At the inception of the internet, some theorists of on-line communication believed racial, gender, or social class interactive ailments would be absent since physical indicators were non-discernible (Tynes, 2004). However, research shows "race takes on a linguistic form" (Tynes, 2004, p. 668) with people from all different age groups. The findings of one study displayed engagement of racial discussions in two prominent on-line teen (ages 13 – 17 years) chat rooms where the topics covered teen issues; the students displayed frequently mentioned writings of positive, neutral and negative remarks about racial and ethnic groups. The chat rooms were not created for discussions of race but for general, teen-related issues, yet there was a high rate of race-related discourse confirming that race is a significant topic of teen life (Tynes, 2004). Such implications suggest that students' prejudices may be revealed when it is believed their communication is private. This racism may be portrayed at the individual covert and overt levels (Scheurich & Young, 1997). Yet, deeply seated issues of racism are lodged consciously or unconsciously within students, and they may support societal stereotyped levels of racism (Scheurich & Young, 1997) when communicating in web based environments.

Methodology

Setting

Two introductory critical multicultural foundations of education courses, taught by the lead author, examined sociopolitical, systemic institutional, personal, societal, and civilizational conscious and unconscious diverse ideologies impacting schooling in the United States (Nieto & Bode, 2012). Furthermore, students analyze critical multicultural theories and literature related to racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, ableism, bilingualism, and overall diversity. "Multiculturalism is a moral and ethical issue. The current conditions in our world call for critical thinkers who can face and resolve complex issues" (Nieto & Bode, 2012, p. 399). Uncovering knowledge and action from diverse ethnic and culturally relevant perspectives

guides students as they learn about social justice for a humane and socially just world (Nieto & Bode, 2012). It is hoped the preservice teachers will become culturally sensitive professionals who will be teacher leaders with solid self-efficacy perspectives. Furthermore, students in these introductory courses examine inquiry based objectives of four primary questions consistently analyzed throughout the semester:

- What is the purpose of schooling?
- What is your role as a teacher in fulfilling that purpose?
- How does schooling continue the existing order?
- How can schooling transform the existing order?

It is important to note students had read and discussed theoretical constructs of power, oppression, and privilege. Often such ideas are both intellectually and emotionally challenging for students. In particular, white, Euro-American students may react with anger, guilt, shame, or disbelief (Johnson, 2005). They read the textbook by Joel Spring (2010), *Deculturalization and the Struggle for Equality*, as well as other articles and chapters providing a critical examination of whiteness by examining the history of schooling from the perspective of non-white groups. Particularly, Native American history was portrayed by Spring (2010), and education as well as deculturalization were shown through deliberate and unintended attempts to assimilate racial/ethnic "others" into a white dominance paradigm (Howard, 2006). Raising consciousness about deculturalization provides future teachers' examination of the sociopolitical and sociocultural perspectives in order to move toward transformative action.

When the Facebook event of the "Cowboy & Indian" basketball game controversy occurred in early 2010, two in-class discussions and in-class readings of the college newspaper articles were conducted. At the end of the semester, students from these two courses were invited but not required to participate in this CLM and answer on-line threaded discussions in Blackboard about the ethical nature of this critical multicultural incident. It is important to note that the instructor did not engage in the Blackboard discussion alongside students given the assumption that such engagement would influence student-to-student dialogue. Instead, this was an opportunity for CLM to

supplement the earlier face to face conversations about the "Cowboys and Indians" Facebook event and encourage students to reflect on course materials through threaded discussions. Participants responded on-line to the following questions:

- What ethical issues do you think students must be aware of related to social networking?
- How does social networking exacerbate unethical behavior?

Participants

The 32 participants in this case study were somewhat consistent with broader national demographics: the National Center of Education Statistics in 2008 conveyed that white teachers comprised 84% of the teaching force, non-whites comprised 16%; female teachers comprised approximately 75% and males comprised 25%. The two courses in this study reflected the following ethnic and racial data: 91% White, 3.6% Hispanic and 1.8% were both White and Hispanic, 1.8% Asian and 1.8% were both White and Native American. Of the thirty two participants in this study, twenty two were female (70%) and ten were male (30%).

The research questions for this study were

- How does ethical or unethical social networking influence preservice teachers' thinking and emotions?
- What emergent themes exist in the data in this exploratory case study?

Coding Procedures

The postings from these two threaded discussions were examined using open coding techniques (Robson 2002) in Nvivo 9.0 qualitative data analysis software. In this software an open-code is conceptualized as a "free node" and hierarchical codes are labeled "tree nodes." Initially open coding aligns with Phil Carspecken's (1996) description of low-level or low-inference coding, "coding that falls close to the primary record and requires little abstraction" (p. 146). Independently, both the lead author and second author read and re-read the entire data set to identify emerging themes. They met and discussed their individually identified themes and agreed on commonalities among the themes. Next, the primary data was examined again, and

umbrella codes were created to capture the major themes of the data. Both Axial coding and selective coding (Robson 2002 p. 194) were employed intermittently during the process of open coding in order to examine emerging categories. Once these tasks were completed, the data was again checked for inter-rater reliability. However, a major limitation to the research method was the inability to do member-checking with participants. In some cases, sentence structure, grammar, and spelling errors somewhat obstructed interpretation of student meaning. In such instances, low-inference interpretations were conducted. Finally, because individual participants were able to see the responses of others, "group think" might have impacted student responses, thus generating commonalities in some responses. Nevertheless, most responses were unique and displayed different positions and opinions suggesting that participants went beyond group think in their answers.

Findings

During the initial and subsequent layered analysis, thirteen themes emerged across the two questions. Upon the first few readings of the data there were many key words identified four or more times: aware/awareness, ethical/unethical, offensive, anonymous, respect, race/racism, understanding, ignorance, actions, social networking, exacerbates, differences, acceptance, culture, communication, and Facebook. These words display student initial perspectives related to the ethical nature of social networking and how it may become exacerbated.

Data was read and reread to identify the emergent themes. The dialogue in the student CLM threaded discussion was carefully analyzed resulting in thirteen themes identified but with further analysis, these themes were collapsed into five emergent, overarching themes. Table 1 illustrates the emergent themes and the corresponding sub-themes.

Emergent Theme 1: False Sense of Anonymity

More than three quarter of the responses within the CLM threaded discussions referenced a false sense of anonymity occurring in Facebook and other social networking sites. The reality is anything posted on Facebook

Emergent Themes	Sub - Themes
1. False Sense of Anonymity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of Accountability Hidden Offenses
2. Proliferation of Negative Opinions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of Respectful Standards
3. Stereotypes and Unethical Behavior	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Justifying Unethical Behavior
4. Ethical Awareness	
5. Respect	

Table 1. Emergent Themes and Sub-Themes

is public information and privacy is limited. Yet, students post ideas they believe are private between them and their friends. The students in this study provided much discussion bringing forth two emergent sub-themes: lack of accountability and hidden offenses.

When students have a sense that their actions within Facebook are anonymous, they also feel they may write without repercussions or accountability for their words. They shared comments such as, "If there is no accountability for an individual's actions [on Facebook], many [students] may feel that it is a license to be offensive and insensitive without apology." The lack of accountability is developed out of the false sense of anonymity because students believe they "are safe to say whatever they want." Since social networking sites allow communication to occur with many friends, the lack of accountability also occurs because only a select amount of people respond to postings, and it is easy to forget the communication has been sent to all people in the person's profile. One student aptly explained, "Facebook further enables this 'anonymous communication' by facilitating the ability for people to share opinions, not just with certain individuals, but with whomever (*sic*) happens to be a friend." Many students wrote that the lack of accountability came from the belief that their computer was a shield to hide behind and offend others through impertinence.

Furthermore, one-third of the student responses reflected upon hidden offenses occurring due to false anonymity on Facebook. Participants felt Facebook provides a "faceless" and anonymous environment, yet the irony is that social networking sites such as Facebook show your picture and your name visible to all friends in your account. Members of this study believed offensive statements posted on Facebook may be true feelings, attitudes and thoughts students assert. Yet, such beliefs may not be revealed in a

face to face interaction for fear of retribution. "Social networking allows more unethical behavior because you can put things out there with the illusion that it is anonymous and you don't have to worry about people coming up to you for face-to-face... confrontation," wrote a participant. Another person in the study declared: "There is a hidden feeling that is offensive about Native Americans that was exposed in this incident, but maybe these were their true feelings and this is the only place they have the guts to portray these." Furthermore, a few participants expressed this idea: "This is just like hypocrisy, saying one view through a [computer] screen but when brought up face to face they say [something] different." Someone else in the study believed that "if people were confronted about their remarks they would be embarrassed and ashamed." Since events such as these seem impervious to personal confrontation, one participant thought "people forget their morals and the people they are offending."

Emergent Theme 2: Proliferation of Negative Opinions

One third of the students reflected upon the multiplying effect of negative opinions in the case against Native Americans in this Facebook event. Negative thoughtless opinions were compared to the virulent nature of diseases spreading from one person to the next making people vulnerable without cause. Such negative opinions are quite easy to get caught up in due to what seems to be a benign sense of humor at the expense of a group. As one member of the study wrote, "Social networking can allow bigoted opinions to reach a massive amount of people and influence others to expound on their own opinions whether they be positive or negative." Additionally, the exponential nature of this incident was addressed by a participant writing: "I think social networking does exacerbate things like this [such as the negative opinions posted on the Cowboys and Indians event] because it is so easy to do and not even think about it until it's way too late." "And the fact that you say it once and 300 of your friends read it means that it can be spread exponentially," explained another participant.

A subtheme emergent from this second theme was a lack of respectful standards in unchartered internet territory barren of rules allowing students to profess negative

opinions profusely. Participants' perceived that a lack of respectful standards or rules seems to warrant the freedom of negative speech and opinions that may be harmful to groups, people, and organizations. One participant explained "the internet is a fairly new system of unstandardized communication." For example, two participants wrote: "People feel like they can say whatever they want because there are no restrictions or rules." Another person also asserted that people will view the "Cowboys and Indians" event "and think it is an 'okay' thing to write anything since other people came up with it before they did."

Emergent Theme 3: Stereotypes and Unethical Behavior

It is important to note the participants in this study were in one of two critical multicultural educational foundations courses examining systemic racism impacting four levels of schooling: personal, institutional, societal, and civilizational conscious and unconscious diverse ideologies in the United States. Three quarters of the students in this study provided connections of perceived stereotyping against Native Americans in this Facebook event; Prior to taking this course, many students would have viewed this event as something meant for fun, uplifting school spirit and not meant to harm anybody. After taking this course, some students responded differently realizing that this event had deep racial, prejudicial and oppressive Native American stereotyping. One participant wrote:

"Students can't help they are naive to what may hurt someone, they have obviously grown up in a culture where issues like these haven't been talked about, they have been sheltered, and may not have many friends of other ethnicities (sic). Before taking this class, I too was naive to the deep racial problems that go beyond individual levels of stereotyping."

Another participant asserted: "Collaborating is so easy to do today online, and hopefully, the more that we can discuss reasons why these sorts of issues are degrading in a class such as this, the more understanding our society and culture will have."

Furthermore, participants explicated ideas related to stereotyping many groups through social networking and how this connects to unethical behavior. A participant

wrote, "I've seen many groups on Facebook bashing on race, religion, people, sexual orientation and many other negative things. These can be very hurtful to others who see this because it's still a physical typing of offensive, unethical statements or ideas." Another participant portrayed similar sentiments by responding, "this is still discriminating." The assertion of yet one more participant expressed: "I feel that social networking influences covert racism, because it seems as if one can get away with more online than they could in person...."

Justifying unethical behavior is a subtheme of the stereotypes and unethical behavior emergent theme. Some participants expressed how peer pressure influences college student behavior and sometimes people will yield to group mentality. One student aptly wrote: "Unethical behavior in social networking is the support of others. A person may feel justified in doing something rash if they see there are over a hundred people who are "fans" of the idea; what they fail to see is the hundreds of thousands who disagree with their ideas." Consequently, another participant believed college students on Facebook may not have the courage to defend the Native American culture because they fear their friends may not understand. Nevertheless, information posted on Facebook that is racist, offensive, unethical and rude causes problems and continues racism on all levels. As one participant explained,

"By becoming aware of how social networking illustrates larger social and civilization level assumptions about race, and the creation of dominance, students can begin to realize the ethical issues which these activities entail. They can enter into self-reflection about their individual positions within this continuum of power, and by doing so, they can think about their actions in terms of how they reinforce various types of inequity (i.e. social, ethical), and how they might challenge them."

Emergent Theme 4: Ethical Awareness

Fifty six percent of responses reflected the importance of ethical awareness as it relates to the influential power of communication in Facebook. One member of the study presented a warning about one's words: "Ethical awarenesses (sic) of social networking are that anyone can

see your groups and anyone might be offended so if you can't say it to an auditorium of your peers without offending someone you shouldn't be putting it on Facebook...." Ethical awareness requires students to think about their actions and inquire about the possible negative impacts and whether such statements may be made in face to face communication. Also, "students must always be aware that even innocent seeming posts and such can be seen as negative ethical ideals" wrote a participant. Further, it was stressed that an ethical awareness in social networking includes interacting with a broad cultural audience and a participant expressed this belief: "if a person is aware that a Native American may be offended by this sort of behavior, they should not participate in it."

Emergent Theme 5: Respect

With the globalization of our society, forty two percent of the participants advocated for the highest respect for themselves and for other cultures, particularly the Native American culture, as it pertains to communication, behavior, and interaction on Facebook. Furthermore, one participant believed that "if the student body was more aware of the respect for Native Americans that... [the university] holds, they would have understood that doing something like dressing up as Indians is indeed disrespectful." Respecting oneself also meant respecting their university, and it was believed by another participant that "their actions affect the reputation of this university as a whole." Not only did the members of this study recognize the importance of respect for Native Americans, but they felt as future educators they had a responsibility to be role models of respect and moral behavior. For instance, a participant believed in creating "change within the norms that have come to be accepted with online interactions, we must first set an example by modifying our own behavior. Although this may not evoke change in every person, hopefully it can have a small effect on the masses of people." It was also emphasized that social networking must operate with "similar constructs of behavior and interactions with others, just like face-to-face interactions" quoted by a participant. Finally, participants felt that respect means using wise judgments, role modeling responsible behavior, and thinking of representing yourself

as well as your university with utmost esteem toward Native Americans and others when engaging in Facebook events.

Implications

This exploratory case study sought to analyze data from CLM on-line threaded discussions in order to examine preservice teachers' thinking and emotions regarding the ethical nature of a Facebook event turned awry against Native Americans. The data presented here is ironically both serious and encouraging and coincides with the literature. First, privacy in Facebook is limited yet a false sense of anonymity presumes. Christopherson (2007) calls the false sense of anonymity "autonomy" where people believe they may operate without fear of social consequences. People operating under such autonomy allow themselves to behave without fear of being identified or evaluated by those they know. This is shown clearly in the results of this study especially as participants explained that the creators of this event seemed to provide an opportunity for behavior that had license to be offensive and insensitive without apology. Such offensive ideas asserted against Native Americans were performed as if the creators had a computer shield to hide behind. The irony of this Facebook event is that the media revealed the nature of the student communication, and the creators were definitely no longer anonymous to the greater community. It is important to be aware of the information posted, because "it has permanence, and one has little control over its interpretation or replication. One's audience may be exponentially larger than anticipated" (Landman, et al., 2010, p. 385).

Additionally, the implications of stereotypes confirmed that race is a significant topic discussed by students and may have negative implications when there is a belief that communication is private. Tynes (2004) states that "race takes on a linguistic form" (p. 668), which is displayed in this Facebook event. Preservice teachers in this study believed racism was present in this event because of the prolific nature of on-line communication where offensive, unethical statements and ideas were cruelly exposed about Native Americans. Facebook users must realize that racial discussions may be made implicitly within face to face communication, but when unethical racial

stereotyping occurs, the communication is explicit (Tynes, 2004; Kang, 2000).

"Facebook is a powerful online social media tool to reach countless individuals" (Paris, Lee & Seery, 2010, p. 532). Yet, the preservice teachers in this study interpreted the actions of the creators of this event to show unethical behavior that prolifically spread virulently. The study revealed that participants also understood that social networking is still rather new and Facebook seems "to be like the American Old West—a vast, wild, and somewhat lawless place that has attracted diverse groups of individuals..." (Green & Bailey, 2010, p. 22). When people forget that their ideas may be portrayed to a larger audience compared to just their Facebook friends, they may be at risk of revealing unethical and racist ideas, monitored by ethical judgments.

The encouraging aspect of this study is that the preservice teachers also recognized the importance of ethical awareness and respect prevailing within social networking communication. As future teachers they believed consequences to one's actions will catch up to the perpetrators of disrespectful or unethical behavior. There is no excuse for unethical behavior and it is necessary to caution against revealing hidden prejudices since on-line communication can easily be revealed.

In closing, using a critical multicultural analysis of the notions examined in this study reveal a "sociopolitical consciousness" (Ladson-Billings, 2006) by the preservice teachers as they deeply deconstruct oppression related to individual and societal levels of such issues as race and racism against Native Americans. The prospective teachers critique and examine the facebook event by position taking from the Native American viewpoint and they recognize the disproportionate power arrangements of social and political structures at work behind the computer screen since the perpetrators explicitly display overt and societally constructed racist and unethical feelings and actions. Critical reflection and dialoging through CLM allowed the prospective teachers to acknowledge the socially constructed identities of their communities related to multicultural awareness, knowledge, skills, and behaviors. They investigated this social network event discovering new critical insights and asserting a

sociopolitical consciousness impacting an ethical respect for Native Americans. These preservice teachers believe they have the potential to stop unethical social networking behavior in the future, and hopefully produce classroom environments where Native Americans and Students of Color thrive.

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