

# Race, Privilege, and Intersectionality: Navigating Inconvenient Truths through Self-Exploration

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Preparing culturally competent information professionals requires experiential approaches that would challenge them to navigate their own cultural landscape through introspective lenses. However, for information professionals, the tricky business of investigating oneself remains largely unacknowledged and unstudied. This study demonstrates how information professionals discover and come to understand the meaning of race, privilege, and intersectionality between them by navigating their own cultural identity. A qualitative content analysis of 33 personal identity exploration narratives reveals the importance of self-awareness in cultivating a culturally responsive mindset. This study addresses an approach to LIS education that calls for intentional efforts in cultivating self-reflexive information professionals for bringing sustainable change in a culturally diverse society.

**Keywords:** cultural competence, race, privilege, intersectionality, cultural literacy, self-reflection, social justice

Cultural competence is the ability of individuals to use academic, experiential, and interpersonal skills to increase their understanding and appreciation of cultural differences and similarities within, among, and between groups (Sue & Sue, 2008). Building cultural competence has received considerable attention in recent academic discourse that emphasizes the benefits of incorporating cultural competence into Library and Information Studies (LIS) curriculum (Andrade & Rivera, 2011; Blackburn, 2015; Cooke, 2017; Jaeger & Franklin, 2007; Jaeger, Subramaniam, Jones, & Bertot, 2011; Rivera, 2013; Mehra, Olson, & Ahmad, 2011; Mestre, 2010; Montague, 2013). Furthermore, developing self-awareness through critical self-reflection is considered a crucial component in building cultural competence (Cooke & Jacobs, 2018; Overall, 2009). However, the LIS scholarship remains limited on practical teaching assignments that incorporate experiential and introspective approaches (Cooke & Jacobs, 2018; Villa-Nicholas, 2018). These serve to enhance LIS students' preparation and motivation for

## KEY POINTS:

- Preparing culturally competent information professionals requires experiential approaches that would challenge them to navigate their own cultural landscape through introspective lenses.
- This study highlights several societal and cultural hot button issues about race, privilege, and intersectionality that may be best addressed and confronted by engaging students in a critical introspection of their individual cultural identities.
- This study demonstrates how self-reflexive teaching exercises can be applied in improving critical self-awareness, facilitating candid conversations around race, and recognizing and appreciating the advantages of self-reflection in practicing cultural humility in teaching multicultural education courses.

practicing culturally responsive services in global information environments and diverse workplace settings.

This article presents one such practical strategy, referred to as the Identity Exploration Assignment from two cultural competence courses taught during the summer 2019 and 2020 semesters at St. John's University. The primary objective of this learning activity was to raise critical awareness on race, identity, privilege, oppression, and intersectionality in students by engaging them in critical introspection of their cultural identities. This study demonstrates that asking students to navigate their own cultural landscape through introspective lenses can be helpful in developing culturally competent information professionals who would thrive in a culturally diverse society. The overall goal of the study was to understand if asking students to navigate their own cultural identity helped them become more culturally sensitive toward people of other cultures. More specifically, the study addressed the following research questions:

- How do information professionals discover and come to understand the meaning of race, privilege, and intersectionality between them?
- What are the implications of critical self-reflection in cultivating cultural competence in information professionals?

Findings demonstrate the effectiveness of the Identity Exploration Assignment in engaging students in a process of self-exploration, discovery, and investment in cultivating a culturally responsive mindset (Bender, Negi, & Fowler, 2010; Negi Bender, Furman, Fowler, & Prickett, 2010). With a focus on specific strategies for facilitating student self-awareness, this article discusses the building blocks of the conceptual framework utilized in navigating cultural identity and components of the Identity Exploration Assignment and concludes with findings based on students' learning reflections.

## Conceptual framework

### The importance of self-awareness in building cultural competency

A culturally competent information professional introspects his or her own assumptions about human behavior, values, biases, preconceived notions, personal blind spots; attempts to understand the worldview of culturally diverse populations; and utilizes appropriate, relevant, and sensitive strategies and skills in working with culturally diverse populations (Sue & Sue, 2008). In a similar vein, Overall (2009) posits that cultural competence consists of three segments: self-awareness, education, and interaction. The first requires LIS students and professionals to take stock of their own identity; "knowledge of the culture of self is at the heart of understanding others and the surrounding world" (p. 192). Doing so allows individuals to look at the unconscious ways that culture has impacted their lives and enables them to have a greater appreciation of different cultures. An abstract cultural appreciation is not the only thing gained. An understanding of ones' identity "informs services to constituents . . . collection development, cataloging practices, program delivery . . . library assessment" (Association of College & Research Libraries, 2012) and even colors workplace relationships.

Social work educators have developed a number of teaching models to specifically build cultural self-awareness. Sakina Mama (2001) stresses promoting diversity as the norm, in

addition to recognition and acceptance of ones' own culture. The Newcastle Model works to incorporate personal experience and history into practice through experiential learning (Negi et al., 2010, p. 224). The Self and Other Awareness Project (SOAP) focuses on the variety of teaching exercises to be used, each centered around self-exploration (Colvin-Burque Zugazaga, & Davis-Maye, 2007). Pedagogical approaches to self-awareness run the gamut as well: class discussions, "diversity audits," family histories, group activities, guest speakers, journaling, reflections, and self-evaluations are just some of the methods used (Cooke & Jacobs, 2018; Desai, Dodor, & Carroll, 2020; Negi et al., 2010; Sakina Mama, 2001; Tervalon & Murray-García, 1998). Thus, reflecting on one's own beliefs and prejudices is a necessary precursor to empathizing and understanding those of different backgrounds, an imperative skill for any information professional.

### Navigating cultural identity

Cultural identity is the extent to which an individual perceives and understands the self in terms of the common attributes, characteristics, or values shared with those who belong to their native culture (Kosmitzki, 1996; Sussman, 2000). As such, cultural identity can be considered a specific type of collective identity that psychologically binds individuals together who belong to the same social group, while simultaneously differentiating them from members of other social groups (Tajfel, 1981). Experiencing cultural differences tends to challenge existing beliefs based on internalization of native cultural norms and serves as a catalyst for self-reflection on cultural identity. Therefore, cultural identity is an important factor to consider when predicting intercultural effectiveness in any diverse workplace settings. There are several layers to dissect that can make up cultural identity. However, in keeping with the research objectives, this study focuses on three aspects: race, privilege, and intersectionality.

In the United States, *race* is the trait that influences most of the aspects of one's cultural identity. Even though race remains at the epicenter of many discrimination and diversity conversations, the LIS scholarship demonstrates hesitation in using the term "race" in its professional discourse (Pawley, 2006). As a result, there remains a tendency to avoid "uncomfortable but critical conversations about race/ethnicity" (VanScoy & Bright, 2018, p. 295) in the information profession. Instead, scholars and researchers prefer using "feel-good" (Peterson, 1995, p. 33) phrases such as "multiculturalism," "diversity," "inclusiveness," and "equity" in their scholarly activities and professional practice. As a result, real discussions about "race" remain obscured behind these euphemistic phrases. Furthermore, the failure to name race minimizes its significance and results in insignificant progress. The LIS field also lacks an adequate framework for increasing diversity in libraries. Honma (2005) recommends that LIS education programs adapt the social justice lens used by ethnic studies fields "to successfully theorize oppression and bridge the gap between [themselves] and communities of color" (p. 18). As race plays a critical role in determining advantages/disadvantages of certain groups over others, the next step would be to understand and analyze the concept of privilege in order to navigate cultural identity.

As *privilege* is a multidimensional concept, this article discusses it from the perspective of societal and workplace privileges (Atewologun & Sealy, 2014). This perspective suggests that certain groups have more social benefits, power, advantages, and opportunities than

other groups simply due to certain special and unearned characteristics they possess (e.g., race, gender, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status). Such privileges generally remain unacknowledged (McIntosh, 1989) by the privileged groups and continue to perpetuate. White privilege, the most widely theorized type of privilege, is the notion that White people derive advantages simply by virtue of their skin color (Black & Stone, 2005; Leonardo, 2004; Lipsitz, 2008). This privilege applies to practically every area of life, from education to health care (Lipsitz, 2008, p. 6), and can blind otherwise sympathetic White people to the pervasive inequalities existing in the world around them. Given the overwhelmingly White makeup of the LIS profession, this is a major hurdle to overcome and serves as a deterrent in increasing inclusivity in the information profession. An analytical framework to understand this juxtaposition approach is intersectionality.

Despite an increased analysis of *intersectionality* in other disciplines, the LIS scholarship remains quite limited in developing an understanding of intersectionality and its implications for the information profession (VanScoy & Bright, 2018; Villa-Nicholas, 2018). As a result, the concept of intersectionality remains vague at its best (Shaffner, Mills, & Mills, 2019). Crenshaw (1991) popularized the term “intersectionality” as that which concerns the processes or relations of marginalization and privilege and their connection to socially-constructed categories of identity, such as gender, race, or class. The idea behind intersectionality holds that forms of discrimination are interrelated variables and cannot be addressed individually. When panels focus on singular issues, for example gender in library technology, it does a disservice to those whose other characteristics wrapped up in their identity (race, sexual orientation, etc.) that are ignored because they are seen as niche (Walker, 2013). Taking all variables into account is necessary to avoid continued marginalization of these groups who possess different characteristics and attributes. Jaeger et al. (2011) call for the broadening of diversity needs to include all those who are *informationally* disadvantaged and experience library access issues due to age, language, or sexual orientation along with race, gender, and socioeconomic status. Thus, a deeper understanding of intersectionality would be helpful for increasing inclusivity in libraries, since “in many academic institutions . . . most fields still view diversity in purely racial terms” (Jaeger et al., 2011, p. 170). Therefore, it is of utmost importance to understand, confront, and address the issues of intersectionality and its implications for increasing inclusivity in information organizations.

In keeping with the framework discussed in the preceding paragraphs, the Identity Exploration Assignment challenged students to engage in a process of self-exploration and asked them to navigate their own cultural identities through self-reflexive lenses.

## Methods and materials

This study presents a qualitative content analysis of 33 personal identity exploration papers from two online “Cultural Competence for Information Professionals” courses taught during the summer 2019 and 2020 semesters at St. John’ University. This assignment challenged students to navigate their cultural identities through a set of discussion prompts. With the exception of two male students, the course participants were all female and belonged to different races/ethnicities, including White ( $n = 25$ ), Black ( $n = 2$ ), Latinx ( $n = 2$ ), Asian ( $n = 2$ ), and Multiracial ( $n = 2$ ).

### Background of the Identity Exploration Assignment

The primary objective of the identity exploration assignment was to raise awareness of identity, privilege, oppression, and intersectionality issues through a critical social justice framework that “recognizes inequality as deeply embedded in the fabric of society (i.e., as structural) and actively seeks to change this” (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012, p. xvii). Students had already completed a wide range of course readings and corresponding learning activities related to cultural competence framework, race, privilege, oppression, intersectionality, implicit bias, microaggression, cultural intelligence, multicultural communication, cultural humility, and so forth before engaging in self-exploration of their cultural identities for the capstone Identity Exploration Assignment. As a result, students had developed a good understanding of these topics before they engaged in self-exploration of their identities through the social justice framework aforementioned.

Students were required to reflect on five of the ten types of identities: race, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, religion, ability, language, nationality, sexual orientation, and class. Furthermore, the students were asked to articulate their learning experiences from this assignment and whether this self-identity exploration exercise helped them gain better insights into their cultural identity. Finally, the students were asked how this cultural awareness made them more sensitive toward people of other cultures (if applicable). Based on similar studies conducted in the social work discipline, a qualitative content analysis approach was utilized to explore the themes that emerged from the students’ discussions and lessons they had learned, taken from their identity exploration papers (Bender et al., 2010; Desai, et al., 2020). This approach provided an adequate basis to develop a comprehensive understanding of students’ perceptions and experiences about complex and nuanced issues of race, privilege, intersectionality, and related issues.

### *Instructor’s positionality*

In LIS, we strive to ensure we take into account the diverse histories and information needs of all people. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge the instructor’s own background and positionality, as this shapes his perspectives and understandings of students’ experiences in the course, and his analysis of their cultural identity exploration papers.

The instructor identifies himself as an Asian straight male who was born and raised in India. In addition to his home country, he has lived, worked, and taught across three different cultures in Finland, Canada, and the United States over the last 20 years. Consequently, his exposure to diverse countries, cultures, and institutions has contributed significantly to the enrichment of his intercultural beliefs, thoughts, and perspectives. Additionally, these experiences impacted his desire, decision, and ability to address uncomfortable topics related to race, privilege, oppression, microaggression, implicit bias, intersectionality, and so forth and their implications for professional practice in information organizations. The overall goal was to raise critical awareness about these topics so they do not get wrapped-up behind euphemistic phrases of diversity, equity, multiculturalism, and so forth. Additionally, promoting self-disclosure among students by providing them a safe environment was an important consideration in teaching this course. However, despite his vast cultural experiences, he remained cognizant about his own positionality in

designing course content, developing learning activities, and analyzing students' identity exploration paper reflections.

## Findings

The analysis of the personal identity exploration narrative papers reveals how the students' understanding of identity, race, privilege, oppression, and intersectionality have evolved through an exploration of their individual cultural identity narratives. The discussions on the findings are arranged under the following four major themes: understanding of race and its implications, understanding of privilege and its implications, understanding of intersectionality, and lessons learned.

### Understanding race and its implications

The students' discussions revealed that a number of factors contributed to the development of their racial identities. Because the class was predominantly White, mirroring the makeup of the information profession, the reflections that students created contributed to a number of pressing themes about race and its implications for the field and American society at large. Accordingly, unless stated otherwise, the comments discussed below were made by White students.

#### *Discovering the meaning of "whiteness"*

Whiteness refers to racial ideologies that uphold the notion of white supremacy by portraying White people and culture as the default identity and the expected norm (Dyer, 1997). As a result, whiteness is used as a cultural benchmark to measure everything else in different ethnicities and cultures.

The reflections from White students highlight the state of relative obliviousness many White people exist in when it comes to race. Even if they acknowledge that racism exists in the abstract, reflecting on the privileges that their own skin color grants them is more difficult since whiteness is the status quo for many communities; it is hard to perceive an advantage when one's experience is painted as normalcy. The most usual response of White students was:

More recently I am starting to understand that my whiteness has had a major role in my life. It was not something I noticed, because it just never occurred to me that it mattered. Which makes sense to me in a way because no one has ever used my whiteness against me or as a reason to not hire me or give me an opportunity, whether I deserved those things or not. Nor, have I had first or even secondhand experience with a person of color experiencing such an injustice. (Comments from a White student)

In contrast, students of color began to understand the meaning of "whiteness" from a very early stage in their lives, whether they were born in the United States or were from immigrant families. Typical comments were:

- Right before I started seventh grade, my family moved to a small town in South Carolina. It was during this time in my life that I really started questioning who I was in relation to whiteness. Suddenly, we lived in an all-white neighborhood and my

brother and I attended an all-white private school. The culture shock left me reeling. I cried in history class during a discussion on slavery, when a classmate said things would've been better if the South had won the Civil War. (Comments from a Black student)

- Not only did I wonder if there was something wrong with being Puerto Rican and Black, I also wondered if I was really “American” after all. Despite what my birth certificate said, I felt so far removed from what my peers defined as normal, American culture. More than that, I questioned my nationality because everyone around me assumed that I couldn't be American because of how different I was from them. (Comments from a biracial student)

The “normal, American culture” spoken of in the biracial student's comment above demonstrates the “othering” of people of color in primarily white spaces. Rather than live up to its oft-heralded description as a cultural melting pot, a land of immigrants, American society upholds whiteness, often middle-class whiteness, as that which constitutes the regular.

Overall, students' reflections seem to highlight the importance of navigating themselves “in relation to whiteness,” which again is held up as the point of reference for all.

### *Marginalization and stereotyping*

Due to their cultural backgrounds, students of color experienced racial discrimination, oppression, microaggression, and stereotyping as a part of their development. As a result, they experienced constant pressures and struggles to conform and assimilate in school, the workplace, and the broader society. Here are some statements reflecting students' experiences:

- I had a crush on a boy who told me, ‘My parents would kill me if I dated a Mexican.’ My English teacher asked me, ‘Did you have to show your Green Card to enroll here?’ (Comments from a Latinx student)
- I had difficulty relating to my white classmates on certain levels, could not see myself in any of the dolls I played with, movies I watched, or books I read. I wanted straight hair, but my hair was kinky curly. I was constantly told that I “talk like a white girl,” and that I am “pretty for a Black girl.” I was told that I must be mixed with another race because my hair wouldn't be so long if I was purely African American. (Comments from a Black student)
- Many of my American friends have racial stereotypes because they believe Asian women prefer staying home, doing housework, and taking care of kids. (Comments from an Asian student)

In contrast, White students' reflections primarily revealed their empathies toward people of color. Moreover, their reflections indicated that it is almost impossible for them to understand the plight and struggles of people of color. One such comment reflecting this view is given below:

One of the most important concepts about recognizing my privilege is to recognize that I cannot and will never understand what it is like to be black or any race other than white. I have never been a victim of stereotyping or microaggressions because of my race. I cannot

pretend to and will not attempt to as it is impossible as well as insulting to think I know what it is like. (Comments from a White student)

Overall, the findings indicate that the experiences of students of color differ drastically from those of White students. Stereotypes are so ingrained into American society that even within the context of friendships they threaten to color how we see one another. Discrimination is something students of color contend with throughout their entire lives, from both children and adults alike. Furthermore, their comments indicate that a lack of representation in media (books, film, TV, etc.) appears to exacerbate the problems of stereotyping. It reinforces the idea that students of color are outsiders in the larger society, and prevents White classmates from learning and acknowledging cultures without descending to stereotypes.

### *Limited exposure to racial discrimination and oppression*

A majority of the White students did not have any personal experiences of racial discrimination or oppression. The following student's experience speaks to the fact that many White people don't see the racism occurring right in front of them. Even when present, they may not notice the microaggression of dirty looks or different treatment that people of color face.

I did not know this [racism] until my best friend, a Filipino girl, was treated differently than me when we were separated in a store. I did not know that when I went out on a date with that mixed-race boy, and he held my hand, we were going to be given dirty looks and subjected to slurs. I did not know why it was so hard for people to understand that people were different. What I should have known was that we were different too, because I grew up with a different type of privilege. (Comments from a White student)

The idea that White people "have the option to be ignorant and completely unaware of the discrimination and oppression" surrounding them is a prime example of the privilege their skin gives them. One such comment reflecting this sentiment is as follows:

As a woman, most of the time my white privilege insulates me from oppression. As a white person, I have the option to be ignorant and completely unaware of the discrimination and oppression that goes on in America. That is not a luxury of many other people in the United States. It would be easy to ignore injustice when I myself do not experience it; however, that makes me complicit. (Comments from a White student)

Students' reflections highlight that in many instances being White insulates people from the fact that racism is not something relegated to the past or certain places in the United States but occurs routinely. Interactions with police are one of the best examples of incongruous treatment between White people and people of color. One such comment was:

I have had experiences that have made me aware of my white privilege in the past. In high school I dated a Black teen my age. During the time we dated and I hung out with him and his friends, I was pulled over two or three times—and in a couple instances we were not



driving we were just in the car together, stationary. Those account for 90% of the times I have ever been pulled over. (Comments from a White student)

Overall, the findings suggest that the limited exposure to racial discrimination becomes a monumental hurdle for White people to understand the agony, frustrations, and injustice of people of color.

### *Challenges in cultural intermingling*

Some student reflections demonstrate that racism can be just as impactful when it is casual and passive rather than explicit. It also reinforces that these experiences happen in private spheres and from a young age. These sentiments are reflected in these given comments:

- It is interesting I chose to date interracial—perhaps not—as I was told growing up that this was not something that should happen. I was not told this in an extremely negative way, but more in an “everyone should stay in their lane” way. This is a message I got from my mother and my father. (Comments from a White student)
- My parents never stayed to talk with my black friends’ parents like they would with my white friends’ parents. They were uncomfortable driving me to my friends’ homes on the other side of town and would encourage me to make friends with the kids in our neighborhood instead. (Comments from a White student)

### *Homogenous cultural bubble*

Many White students’ reflections indicated that they grew up in their homogeneous “cultural bubble.” Typical comments of students were:

- For my personal life, I have had very little exposure to different cultures for a large chunk of time. Mostly, I grew up around people who look like me and who share the same religion, despite some differences in beliefs. The schools I attended had a population of mostly white people from elementary age through university. In addition, my co-workers have also been predominately white. (Comments from a White student)
- My family is kind, but they raised me in a culture bubble that made me ashamed of part of my identity and insulted my friends’ cultures. It will take time, but I can do better. (Comments from a White student)
- Being white was, again, not something I thought much about. My family was white, as well as aunts, uncles, and cousins. Family friends, and anyone really, who came to my house for a get together were white. Even to the present day, this statement is still true. Thinking about it now, even all my friends are of the same race. And why is this? Obviously, something is amiss. Was it because it was the only race I was exposed to as child and, since then, that is just who I naturally gravitate to? It’s not like I avoid other races. College and the real world or [*sic*] no longer the sheltered areas of childhood. I would never discourage such a friendship or try to avoid it. But the fact stands, my group of friends (personal friends, not acquaintances or colleagues)

is wholly my race. This must signify something and a fault on my part. (Comments from a White student)

These comments indicate that if raised in environments that perpetuate the primacy of whiteness, people are less likely to think critically about the role race plays in their lives. It also hints at the systemic and structural race issues in the country, and how it plays out in areas like education and the economy, where people of color must contend with race constantly.

### *Feelings of white guilt*

White guilt comprises of negative or uncomfortable feelings White people experience when they are exposed to the atrocities and injustice of previous generations and the unearned privileges they inherited (Hitchcock, 2002). A number of White students' reflections highlighted their feelings of white guilt. The following statements reflect their sentiments:

- I am at a point in my life now that I feel the immense white guilt of having witnessed my privilege, but being [*sic*]unable to change the system. If I was a black female, I can almost guarantee I would have been making even less than I was at that job. (Comments from a White student)
- Through this class, I have learned that in the here and now, and moving forward, the best course of action is to be aware of and acknowledge where I fall within a privilege matrix. Guilt and rejection is [*sic*]not the answer. Awareness and sensitivity is [*sic*]. (Comments from a White student)

The findings suggest that, while guilt can be an understandable reaction to the realization of white privilege, it does little to improve the situation. Where the first comment addresses the guilt associated with a feeling of powerlessness “to change the system,” the second comment identifies “awareness and sensitivity” as positive steps that students can take to move past guilt and on to recognition and change.

### *Illusions of colorblind ideologies*

Colorblind ideology is the perception that racism no longer exists and therefore should not be addressed (Mitchell, 2020). Furthermore, this ideology assumes that everyone has equal opportunities to succeed in the society. “I see people, not color,” or “we should not see any color” are the typical reactions from some White people who propagate this ideology when confronted about racism. Some students' reflections revealed their views on how their mistaken beliefs in equality had led to the development of colorblind ideologies. A few such comments are:

- Until this class, I was blissfully “color blind”. I saw absolutely no difference between myself and my friends—even though they were watched carefully by the principal at school and couldn't afford to go to the movies or mall so hung out at the library after school. I mistakenly believed that all cultures are basically the same. (Comments from a White student)

- During the LIS 275: Cultural Competence course I was made aware of the concept: color blind. It made me think that maybe stressing that we are the same, all equal, has turned me color blind. I try so hard not to see color in an effort to promote equality, that maybe I am contributing to another problem. Because of my history in believing that discrimination and inequality extends to everyone not just minorities, I started to think that the answer was just to let go of the past and just embrace people. *All lives matter*. But maybe I am becoming color blind. This course as [*sic*] also made me realize that part of my cultural development was lacking because I was trying to push a “color blind equality.” (Comments from a White student)

These statements indicate that equality is intertwined with America’s self-image, manifested in our foundational texts. Unquestioning faith in this lofty ideal allows White people to adopt colorblind stances by believing that their lived experience is the same as that of Black, Latinx or Asian Americans. That is, White people often presume that everyone is treated just as they are despite indications and evidence to the contrary.

#### *Limited exposure to multicultural environments*

Most of White students’ discussion revealed their exposure to multicultural environments and multicultural education remained limited until they began higher education. Some students remarked:

- Throughout this course I learned that I am not as aware of all issues and terms connected to racial/ethnic injustices as I thought. For example, I had not heard of the term intersectionality. (Comments from a White student)
- Perhaps the most significant aspect of my identity is my race. Being a white person affords me so much more privilege than if I was of any other race. While I was aware of the issues of race from school and in movies, it was not until reaching higher education that I learned about systemic and institutionalized racism. (Comments from a White student)
- I really only began to experience diverse cultures in college where I learned about biases and racism. I did not understand privilege until I met friends with different views, experiences and cultures than my own. (Comments from a White student)

The above students’ comments demonstrate that higher education can be a transitional environment, where students leave their familiar surroundings and enter more diverse communities of learners. Encountering new people and dealing with novel situations gives students greater insight into their previously limited worldview, building empathy and understanding. The move helps students expand their sense of privilege.

#### *Implicit bias*

About one fourth of White students’ reflections highlighted their struggles with implicit bias, or the idea “that people can act on the basis of prejudice and stereotypes without intending to do so,” in both “automatic” and “unconscious” information processing behaviors (Stanford, 2019). A few remarks made by students include:

- I struggle sometimes with guilt over my privilege, but I have become much more aware of my unconscious biases and the changes I need to make in my thoughts and behaviors. (Comments from a White student)
- I feel as though these days I am much more aware of what it means to have implicit bias. This is a form of racism and bias expression. I am working to not only be aware but consciously eradicate it as much as possible from myself. It is a slow process. I am trying to move beyond a surface-level understanding, but I am still deeply flawed. (Comments from a White student)

### Understanding privilege and its implications

Students looked at the idea of privilege through their different worldviews. While White students focused on examining the privileges they derived by nature of their skin color, students of color focused on the marginalization and stereotyping they experienced, which are presented in the previous section “Understanding race and its implications.” In addition, some students’ comments also reflected on the issue of economic privileges.

#### *Recognition of white privilege*

The findings revealed that a majority of students ( $n = 29$ ) were aware of the pros and cons of their race, ethnicity, and background and the implications of those qualities for their professional careers. However, they had not engaged in any analysis of the privileges derived from their race, ethnicity, schooling or family background prior to working on this assignment. In particular, many White students ( $n = 19$ ) felt that their understanding about their privileges and related benefits remained at surface level. While a small number of White students ( $n = 4$ ) demonstrated a blissful ignorance of their privileges, some chose to downplay their privileges or “feigned” ignorance at times. Typical comments of students were:

- Perhaps the biggest evidence of white privilege is not having to acknowledge it at all. I spent much of my life not realizing that many of my identity choices came, and still come from, a place of massive privilege. When reflecting on my own identities, I am still shocked by how long I went before I associated many of my own identities with privilege. (Comments from a White student)
- Frankly, my privilege is another aspect of my identity I have tried to cover up in the past. It has been convenient or helpful to me in some jobs or in some groups of friends to downplay my family [*sic*] financial security, or feign ignorance. I am sure there was a better way to have handled myself in these uncomfortable situations. (Comments from a White student)
- As a white woman, I benefit from the system of systemic inequality and oppression in the library field. (Comments from a White student)

#### *Understanding privilege through “ableism”*

It was interesting to note that almost every White student appeared to be discovering the meaning of privilege through the lens of “ableism,” that is their lives have not been without struggles, and they have worked hard to accomplish everything (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012).

At the same time, some of them also acknowledged that they understood that their lives had not been made more difficult due to their skin color. A few of them also reflected that it is impossible for them to imagine the struggles of people of color. Some students reflected their feelings as follows:

- White privilege does not mean that there haven't been struggles, but that your life has not been made more difficult because of the color of your skin. (Comments from a White student)
- While my life was not necessarily easy, it was not made harder because of the color of my skin, or my religion, or my sexuality. (Comments from a White student)
- My life is not without struggles but overall it is easier than most. (Comments from a White student)

Some students also acknowledged that they are still grappling with the disparities in social and economic privilege. One such comment is given:

- I have always known I have privilege behind me. I do not think I fully understood how much until I came out of my little enclave and realized not all kids had the financial security I had. I am still wrapping my head around my economic and racial privileges. I am grappling with realizing the privilege, being aware of it, and at the same time feeling so grateful for it. (Comments from a White student)

Overall, the findings indicated that race and privilege are two sides of the same coin and play a critical role in determining an individual's social power, oppression, and opportunities throughout their careers and lives.

### Understanding of intersectionality

The students found learning about intersectionality and its implications to be one of the most profound and enlightening experiences of the course. They made efforts to navigate through their own cultural identities while looking through the lenses of race, gender, religion, ethnicity, language, and more, and discovered an intersectionality between them. Their discussions revealed three major themes: feelings of inadequacy, battling identity crisis, and evolving worldviews.

#### *Feelings of inadequacy*

The findings reveal that Latinx and Black students expressed notions of self-doubt, inadequacy, and a need to prove themselves due to their position as outsiders in a white-dominated society. These feelings are typically influenced by parents and relatives who themselves have had to persevere through racism and classism to succeed. Typical examples of students' sentiments are:

- My father has always taught me that, "Whatever you do, make sure you are the best at it," and my grandmother has taught me that, "You have to work twice as hard as white people." I believe that this is due to the fact that my family has learned that as African American people in society, we have to fight for our achievements and

prove our worth in order to be successful. While this mentality is motivating, it is also extremely taxing and has caused an enormous amount of anxiety for me. I am constantly concerned about my work not being good enough due to what many call imposter syndrome. (Comments from a Black student)

- My family immigrated to California in the 1950s as part of a federal program to bring laborers to the United States. This status as the “laboring class” impacted our identity in that the messaging to us as children was that to be an immigrant laborer was not positive. Even though I have made progress, I still struggle with what it means to be a woman of color from a working class, bilingual, religious family. These elements of my identity make me feel powerless and unimportant at times. I carry the weight of marginalization because of the stereotypes about people like me. (Comments from a Latinx student)

### Battling identity crisis

Students also spoke of struggles they faced understanding their own identity. These might stem from hurtful, pernicious stereotypes, such as Asian students dealing with the perception that they are quiet and introverted, or might be due to the intersectionality of competing minority identities. In particular, biracial students grappled with identity crises. If they have more Asian or Latinx features than White, it made their lives challenging. In other words, despite their mixed racial identity, others identified them as Asian or Latinx. In contrast, if their features and complexion were predominantly White, they were considered White, which overshadowed their other ethnicity. Despite their biracial background, their predominant White features benefitted them, and they were perceived as White. Some biracial students reflected their struggles about their cultural identities as follows:

- With such a mixed identity, I am a person who alternates between two worlds. It did not matter how often I reminded them that I was also Italian, I looked Chinese, therefore that was the only ethnicity I was, Asian was the only race they saw me as. I was mistaken for Korean, Japanese, Filipino and every other Asian ethnicity, and people outright refused to believe that I was half Italian. I did not “look” it and I certainly did not pass as White. They chose my identity for me. It did not help that I was also only one of two Asian children in the entire school. Different variations of “Where are you really from?” would continue even to this day. (Comments from a biracial student)
- The next defining characteristic of my appearance is my light skin. This definitely holds a lot of privilege in America, where there is often bias and stereotype against those who look “different.” I generally look like a White American, but my mom is from the Dominican Republic and my dad is from Cuba. When I say this to people they usually don’t believe me. It is hard for people to believe that I could be part of a culture that is predominately dark-skinned, but there is diversity in the islands that people may not be aware of. (Comments from a biracial student)

### Evolving worldview

A desire to grow, learn, and evolve was a consistent theme in the reflections of White students’ identity exploration papers. One such comment reflecting this view is given below:

My identity has largely been shaped by my experiences, but now I will use my knowledge of cultural humility to work towards understanding how my identity effects my perception and views of others. I am aware of the ways that parts of my identity intersect and how these intersections often lead to privilege. While I cannot change my experiences growing up, or the privilege that I am afforded because of my identity, I can UN-learn and reshape my biases, my views and myself. (Comments from a White student)

In summary, while “evolving worldviews” was the consistent intersectional theme among the White students, students of color expressed “feelings of inadequacy” and “battling identity crisis” as part of their cultural identities as they discovered the meaning of race, privilege, and their intersectionality, and the implications of these for their careers and lives.

### Lessons learned

As developing cultural competence is a lifelong journey, students were asked to reflect on “three action steps” to further develop their cultural competence skills in their identity exploration narratives. Although their discussions highlighted a number of approaches toward developing their cultural competence skills, they could be organized into the following four subthemes:

#### *The role of self-reflection in developing cultural competence*

Irrespective of their race, ethnicity, and cultural background, the students’ discussions recognized the importance of continuing self-reflection in order to hone their cultural competence toolkit. They emphasized the importance of respectful listening and pushing their thinking as useful approaches to gaining deeper insights into the nature of their blind spots or as remedial strategies that could lead to growth. A few such comments were:

- While this paper may seem like me ranting about growing up in a blissfully ignorant blanket of privilege, I think it is an important display [*sic*] self-identified lack of oppression that I wish I had the ability to see earlier. Much of what we have learned in this Cultural Competency course is that in order to make a positive cultural change, we must first reflect on our own attitudes and beliefs when it comes to intercultural interactions. (Comments from a White student)
- I will regularly engage in critical self-reflection, which I learned to move forward in cultural sensitivity. We cannot get complacent by believing we accept all with an open mind. We must always be prepared to look at our current beliefs, understandings, and stereotypes to break past them and adjust our insights. We must be ready to question ourselves and allow others to challenge us. (Comments from a biracial student)
- Through exploring my multiple identities, I have a better understanding of myself, and I believe it will help me better understand others. Even though I struggle with my intersectionality and have experienced bias in the workplace, I am proud to be who I am. That’s how my different identities make me unique. Exploring myself helps improve my cultural awareness and continuously improves my cultural competence that guides my professional practice as a librarian. (Comments from an Asian student)

### *Continuing education and professional development*

Across the board, students emphasized the importance of continuing education and professional development as a part of their desire to become culturally competent information professionals. Typical comments of students were:

- Continuing my own education to learn more about the cultures of others, so I can be understanding of new cultures when I come across them during the course of my life and career. (Comments from a Black student)
- The first action step would be a commitment to being a lifelong learner of cultures and identities. Of course, we cannot know everything about everyone, but I want to be committed to openness and growth in my knowledge on topics that especially impact the community I work in. (Comments from a Latinx student)
- I would like to continue reading, watching videos, and listening to speakers about race and privilege and intersectionality to become more aware of touchpoints, and my blind spots and how I might be a microaggressor. (Comments from a White student)

### *Practicing cultural humility*

Some of the most striking findings of this study came from the students' vivid personal reflections examining their own cultural identities. Their reflections highlighted the need to constantly keep an open mind along with acknowledging, accepting, and appreciating cultural differences and practicing cultural humility at both the individual and organizational level. These are a few such remarks:

- Upon reflection of my cultural identity, I've grown more sensitive to the idea that everyone has a depth of identities behind the one they put on display. (Comments from a White student)
- I plan to practice cultural humility by respectfully listening to others and asking them questions. This can be as simple as asking someone what their pronoun is, to where they come from, to what their daily lives are like. As an information professional, it is important that I understand people's values and the various aspects of who they are. In doing so, I will be able to better understand their barriers and strengths, and therefore be able to meet their needs as best as possible. (Comments from a Black student)
- Moving forward, I hope to keep pushing my own thinking, and inspire growth and change in others who might seem stuck in their unwelcoming attitudes and behaviors. Not only will I continue to be sensitive to other people's cultural backgrounds, but I will keep in mind the issues of intersectionality that might also be present. The only way to keep growing is to keep an open mind and stay committed to fairness and inclusivity. (Comments from a biracial student)

### *Leveraging advocacy and social justice toolkit*

The analysis revealed that all of the participants acknowledged inherent structural inequities and barriers that contribute to promote homogeneity in the LIS profession. Moreover, their reflections indicated a willingness and desire to help correct structural inequities in libraries for all patrons whether they are women, people of color, refugees, transgender



people or those disenfranchised in any way. These students' comments given highlight these sentiments:

- As a librarian, it is my job to recognize the system that has benefited me and that is the same system that must be dismantled. No one is asking for white people to apologize for our whiteness; that is not something we can change. People are asking for equality, and we owe that to them, which means we must make the conscious choice to be activists and allies. In the library field, most jobs are held by white women and if we fail to acknowledge that systemic inequality, we are no better than any other organization in our society. (Comments from a White student)
- By looking at my own identities, I have realized that I have to take a more active role in fighting the oppression of others. As I am privileged in several ways, I have to better use those advantages to help those that face discrimination due to their identities. (Comments from a Latinx student)
- The most important issues that librarians deal with each day is equity, advocacy, and serving diverse people in the community. Cultural competence is a great way for us to continue reflecting on our daily works and upgrade ourselves. (Comments from an Asian student)

## Discussion and implications

The overall goal of the present study was to understand if asking students to navigate through their own cultural identity helped them become more culturally sensitive toward people of other cultures. In particular, this study attempted to understand how students discover and come to understand the meaning of race, privilege, and intersectionality between them. Findings reveal how students' understanding of identity, privilege, oppression, and intersectionality evolved by self-exploring their own cultural identity narratives. The findings also indicate that students who examine their own cultural identity will likely act with more cultural sensitivity toward people of other cultures. Overall, the following themes emerged from the study findings:

### Engaging in uncomfortable race conversations

Recognition was the first step that students took toward gaining cultural competence. Through self-exploration, students contended with their place in a world that often prescribes more value in whiteness. Their reflections suggest that the foundation of racial identity is laid in the experiences of childhood through a complex process of interactions within family, school, communities, and society at large. Quite a few White students reported tacit or explicit discouragement from their parents when intermingling with their friends of color. Their reflections demonstrate how racial prejudice is expressed through both unspoken and overt social signals and their influence in hampering meaningful relationships and interactions with people from diverse cultural backgrounds. Additionally, their upbringing in self-segregated homogeneous cultural bubble characterized by the primacy of whiteness contributes to the development of progressive and liberal colorblind ideology. This ideology suggests that the best way to deal with race and systemic racism is by ignoring, avoiding,

minimizing, or refuting it (Bonilla-Silva, 2017; Lewis, 2001; Pollock, 2004; Schofield, 2007). Furthermore, this ideology reinforces the idea of equality and meritocracy by cultivating a myth of post-racial society.

A majority of the White students lacked personal experiences of racial discrimination or oppression. Consequently, it becomes challenging for them to experience the gravity of the racism occurring right in front of them. In contrast, students of color discussed their experiences feeling marginalized and facing stereotypes and identified examples of their othering in white spaces. Moreover, they also reflected on constant pressures and struggles to adapt, conform, and assimilate in school, the workplace, and the broader society. This critical reflection of their experiences with discrimination allowed students to think through their reactions to these negative experiences and how these incidents may have influenced the development of their ethnic and racial identity.

For White students, reflections showed rapid growth in the ways they thought about and understood race. One way this manifested is as white guilt, or “the crippling feeling that one has no idea of what to do” (Flynn, 2015, p. 117) to repair longstanding historical inequities. Another example was the disavowal of former colorblind ideologies that were believed to be anti-racist but can represent a negation of the racism experienced by minority groups (Me-kawi, Bresin, & Hunter, 2017). White students also acknowledged the effect of implicit bias on their views of race and prejudices that are common across academia, medicine, criminal justice, and business (Jost et al., 2009). They also described higher education as their first opportunity to bond, empathize, and understand people from diverse cultural backgrounds.

This study demonstrates that this introspective exercise helped students reflect on many nebulous social nuances that helped evolve their understanding of racial similarities and differences and their influence on their identity development. Their discussions demonstrate the importance of reflection as a tool to process ones’ own experience around race and evolve to become more culturally competent. Furthermore, it also challenges LIS educators to find innovative ways to engage students in uncomfortable and meaningful explorations of the social construct of race and its implications for professional practice in information organizations.

### Acknowledging privileges

Discussions of white privilege dominated the students’ internal reflections. While they were aware of the existence of privilege most White students admitted their considerations were merely surface level. This mirrors an ongoing dispute in the field over the use of the term “privilege” itself. Privilege may not be an appropriate descriptor as it often omits “the institutions, practices, and processes that produce [privilege] in the first place” (Bonds & Inwood, 2016, p. 716), where the phrase “white supremacy” more accurately encapsulates the structural racist systems in place that make privilege possible (Caswell, 2017; Leonardo, 2004).

Awareness of students’ privilege ran the gamut from complete to partial to utter ignorance. This less-than-full awareness is hardly surprising; polls indicate that over 60% of White respondents blame Black unemployment on a “lack of willpower” and an even higher percentage believe Black people are afforded the same opportunities as White people “to live

a middle-class life” (Lipsitz, 2008, p. 5) but are simply unable to achieve it. Ignorance can also be intentionally cultivated because of a dislike of engaging in difficult critical thinking.

This study indicated that a majority of students were aware of the pros and cons of their privileges and the implications of these privileges for their careers and lives. However, they did not engage in an in-depth analysis of their privileges. The majority of the White students primarily grew up in a homogenous cultural bubble. While their upbringing and white privilege shielded them from any racial inequities and oppression, it also posed challenges in cultural intermingling and served as barrier in their exposure to multicultural environments. In contrast, students of color personally experienced marginalization, discrimination and stereotyping throughout their careers and lives. As a result, the students’ worldviews differed due to their varying contexts, particularly when they attempted to understand the meaning of privilege and its implications for their lives and professional careers.

The findings from students’ candid conversations reveal their willingness to admit to their privileges in addition to highlighting their struggles. However, we seldom notice similar courage from professionals and scholars in their academic discourse and professional practice. Acknowledging their privileges as the dominant culture group are real is the first step before we can understand, address, and confront the plight of underprivileged communities. Importantly, realization of privilege is not the destination but one step on a lifelong journey. LIS professionals must strive to move beyond bettering individual understanding and work to undo the legacy systems that continue to perpetuate white supremacy (Hudson, 2017).

### Understanding people’s stories through intersectionality

Crenshaw (1991, 2016) stresses that intersectionality can be seen as a road with multiple intersections, and these different intersections create a special set of experiences and needs for each person. Similarly, Adichie (2009) emphasizes that people are made up of multiple stories and identities, and they are not defined by just one of these aspects in their life. Therefore, it is of utmost importance to understand, confront, and address the issues of intersectionality and its implications in multicultural education courses and professional practice in information organizations.

Students continually credited the Cultural Competence course as the genesis for their understanding of the multiple facets of their identities through introduction to intersectionality. Once they understood “that the multiple dimensions of difference which interweave and intersect provide a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of oppression,” (Bhopal, 2020, p. 808) students were able to better conceptualize of their own identity issues or understand how intersectionality provided them with previously unforeseen privileges and advantages.

As hinted at above, intersectionality manifested in varying ways for the students in this study. Students of color described needing to overcome feelings of inadequacy and the demand that they work harder to achieve the same level of success that are afforded to White people. This pressure typically stemmed from relatives who faced discrimination themselves, pressure that reached a crescendo for those who acknowledged issues of race, gender, and socioeconomic status as competing identities. They also talked of having identity crises if they deviated from stereotypical expectations of how they were expected to look or behave.

For White students, the biggest reaction to intersectionality was one of change. Time spent evaluating their own privilege and processing their white guilt led students to reassess how implicit bias may impact their behaviors. Lastly, they demonstrated understanding that they have been beneficiaries of a racist system, and while they cannot change the past, they can commit to reshaping the future as a mutually beneficial place.

### **Value of continued self-reflection in developing cultural competence**

Through active listening and challenging their own preconceptions students believed they were making progress toward cultural competency. Significantly, they understood that to achieve the benefits of self-reflection they needed to commit to a lifelong learner model and embrace reflection as a key part of future professional development. These are all essential elements of practicing cultural humility, which is both the “process as well as the goal of cross-cultural communication” (Chang, Simon, & Dong, 2012, p. 273). The study also underscores the outcomes possible from discussions of privilege and intersectionality: many students, newly aware of their fortunate positions, stated their intention to serve as advocates for more marginalized communities in the LIS field.

Their discussions revealed the need to redress power imbalances in libraries and develop mutually beneficial partnerships with underserved communities on behalf of individuals and defined populations. Their discussions also emphasized the importance of continuing education and professional development through reading, training programs, seminars, and webinars. Additionally, their reflections highlighted their intentions, plans and approaches to work with diverse communities and people with different cultural backgrounds.

LIS organizations can use similar self-reflexive exercises in their annual retreats and strategic planning events and can engage themselves in brainstorming some action steps in developing greater cultural competence with which to serve their communities.

### **Safe and supportive environment for promoting self-exploration**

Overall, the students’ appeared to be more empathetic and sensitive toward people of other cultures as a result of their self-introspection. The findings indicated that providing opportunities for self-reflection and introspection and dedicated spaces for discussing anti-racist ideas offers several benefits to the participants (Caswell, 2017; Chang et al., 2012; Hudson, 2017). First, this reflective assignment challenged the students to discover the meaning of race, privilege, oppression, and intersectionality among themselves through a self-introspective lens. Second, this self-reflective exercise helped them understand the relevance of cultural competence and its implications for the LIS profession. Finally, and most importantly, the students’ overall comments indicated how such introspection helped increase sensitivity toward other cultures and fostered a sense of cultural humility.

The findings also highlight implications for incorporating antiracist pedagogical approach in teaching diversity and multicultural education courses in LIS programs. Bringing antiracist pedagogy in the classroom begins with faculty becoming aware of their social position, its impact on their teaching, and their role and responsibilities in a race-conscious society (Kishimoto, 2018). Furthermore, this pedagogical approach requires intentional

efforts in developing self-reflexive exercises that would empower students to engage in critical self-exploration of their social positions/identities and their implications for professional practice in information organizations.

Given the small sample size and qualitative nature of the study, the findings cannot be generalized to a broader population. Although increased self-awareness of their identity development along the cultural competency continuum was reflected, the study did not measure actual behavioral change in students. Nevertheless, the findings clearly demonstrated the benefits gained from a social justice-based approach, including improving critical self-awareness, appreciating the advantages of continuing critical self-reflection in practicing cultural humility, and incorporating an antiracist component in teaching multicultural education courses. This study demonstrates how a learning experience involving personal identity exploration narratives can be utilized to foster cultural humility (Chang et al., 2012; Hodge, 2019; Lund & Lee, 2015) in LIS programs for future information professionals.

## Conclusion

While this sample is not a microcosm of the entire population, it does highlight several societal and cultural hot button issues that may be best addressed and confronted through candid conversations. Students, more adaptable and malleable in their thinking than long-time professionals, should be given space in which to process their thinking without being forced to publicly relive their trauma and where they may be less afraid to admit their failures in culturally empathetic thinking. But by their very nature, these topics may elicit tough feelings, and so long as educators demur to complaints and defensiveness (i.e., white fragility), progress on both individual and organizational levels will be impossible.

Reflection and introspection are our most invaluable tools for developing cultural competence. Chang et al. (2012) describe self-critique and self-evaluation as the necessary first step of the undertaking, as it forces practitioners to address their own preconceived beliefs and compensate for these during service interactions. Students' identity exploration narratives showed that exposure to ideas surrounding privilege and intersectionality, combined with self-reflection, led them to identify biases they possessed and areas for future growth.

The conversation needs to move beyond access, collection, and services for marginalized populations. Not doing more risks making the goal of diversity a buzzword or mere lip service. Instead, information professionals need to engage in difficult conversations about race, privilege, and intersectionality. Asking students and professionals to confront subjects that may make them uncomfortable, like frank discussions of racial discrimination and white privilege, is a step toward dismantling the existing systems of oppression instead of attempting to work within them.

Incorporating anti-racist components in the teaching of multicultural education courses is also essential. Instructors, as well as students, need to engage in continuous self-introspection so that they remain unbiased in multicultural education courses in ways that would help candid conversation about race, privilege, and other difficult social justice issues flourish (Kishimoto, 2018). Moving past bias does not mean pure neutrality; Caswell (2017) writes that "modeling allegedly neutral behavior . . . is also a risk" (p. 233) in the perpetuation of white supremacy. Information professionals must come to terms that White

people lag behind their peers on multicultural issues because of their propensity to socialize within their own racial group and their dominant place in American society (Sodowsky, Kuo-Jackson, Richardson, & Corey, 1998). Acknowledgment of this fact, difficult as it may be for some, marks only the beginning of a lifetime journey. We need to craft students into a new cohort of information professionals who see the effects of race, privilege, and intersectionality in their own life, desire to achieve an individual cultural competency, and look outside the personal to see that “systemic racism ultimately represents . . . a structural phenomenon that exceeds attitudinal error” (Hudson, 2017, p. 18). Above all else, this study illustrates the transformational effect that self-reflection and internal dialogue can have, and their practice should be encouraged across the LIS field.

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