"What do You Mean by Whiteness?": A Professor, Four Doctoral Students, and a Student Affairs Administrator Explore Whiteness

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In this article, four doctoral students—two White females, one African American female, a White male—an African American female assistant professor, and an African American male student affairs administrator reflect on the difficult dialogues that took place during a seminar on whiteness. Watt's (2007) Privilege Identity Model (PIE) was integral in understanding students' reactions and reflections as they began confronting and interrogating whiteness in their own experiences.

As a Black female scholar, I have consciously attempted to address privilege through the creation of courses that afford my students and me opportunities to engage in difficult dialogues (e.g., Watt, 2007). Opportunities to engage in difficult dialogues are important on today's college campuses as the world in which we live is becoming increasingly diverse. Thus student affairs practitioners must create opportunities and be prepared to facilitate dialogues that help students deal with issues of privilege, diversity, and social justice (Watt, 2007). During an intensive summer session, I was afforded the opportunity to create and teach a doctoral seminar entitled, *Critical Perspectives on Whiteness in Education.* Nine interested doctoral students signed up for the course. We began the semester by exploring our own definitions of whiteness. Together, we collaboratively constructed a definition we constantly revisited throughout the course: "Whiteness is a hegemonic system that perpetuates certain dominant ideologies about who receives power and privilege. Whiteness maintains itself in cultures through power dynamics within language, religion, class, race relations, sexual orientation, etc."

As the instructor, my goal was to challenge students and involve them in a process of self-critique by putting themselves in their statements, meaning that any time students made generalizations about race, class, gender, or religion,

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they were asked by me, and/or by their peers, to think about the implications of their statements. As we began to share our experiences, tensions surfaced, forcing us to wrestle with discomfort.

Watt's (2007) Privilege Identity Model (PIE) was integral in understanding the response and reactions students had as they addressed tensions and contradictions in their own lives. Watt asserts that meaningful and difficult dialogues are often blocked by resistant behaviors. The PIE model articulates eight defense mechanisms (e.g., denial, deflection, rationalization, intellectualization, principium, false envy, minimalization, and benevolence) that people often engage during difficult dialogues. The PIE model provided a lens to examine student reflections and responses as they began to interrogate how whiteness functions in their own lives and experiences.

This article will focus on the reflections of four doctoral students from the whiteness course, the tensions they faced as they moved through various defense modes and how they began to confront whiteness in their own lives and collective experiences. The following section will focus on student's reflections. As an introduction to the section, I will briefly outline various defense modes that students exhibited:

1) Michelle's (a White female student) first reaction was to think about her former role as a teacher and her own *denial* of the complexities of privilege. She then reflected on how she *rationalized* her experiences, as she had not been socialized to see her own privilege. 2) Dionne's (an African American female student) reflection focused primarily on the dissonance that she felt as she and her peers engaged in *confronting* privilege. 3) Susan (a White female) reflected on her *denial* and inability to initially see her classmate's description of Black and White privilege. She also acknowledged that prior to the course she had used her privilege as a White person to avoid thinking about her own racist ideas. She *deflected* those thoughts and associated them only with individuals she categorized as racist White people which did not include herself. 4) Frank (a White male) reflected on how his experiences led him to grad school. Frank's reflection suggested that his response to dissonance was *intellectualization* as he sought out graduate school to better understand whiteness and privilege.

Recognizing Privileged Identity

Michelle

When I think about whiteness, the first image that comes to mind is my reflection in the mirror. I have become more aware of the role that whiteness plays in my identity as a teacher and researcher. My interest in the whiteness course stemmed from several tensions. One of those was the tension I had felt in my career as a White English teacher in a predominantly White suburban high school for five years. As a teacher, I embraced controversy and used it to motivate students to read. We talked about prejudices and stereotypes, racism, and language. Yet, I stopped short of creating a space for students to examine these issues in their own lives. While I told my students that the classroom was the perfect place to discuss controversial issues, I was not prepared to facilitate difficult dialogues. Instead, I held my breath and hoped that politeness would prevail.

When I read an abbreviated version of *White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack* (McIntosh, 1988) after class the first evening, I realized that I would not be able to resolve the tensions. Instead, they would be complicated by my implication in whiteness. As a White person, I too, "realized I had been taught about racism as something that puts others at a disadvantage, but had been taught not to see one of its corollary aspects, White privilege, which puts me at an advantage" (McIntosh, 1988, p.1). As McIntosh unpacks her "invisible knapsack of unearned assets" that she says she can count on cashing in each day, I realized I carry them around as well, and was also "'meant' to remain oblivious" (McIntosh, 1988, p.1).

Dialoguing about whiteness in our community, nation, and world, was difficult. As we worked to define whiteness and the ways in which it is perpetuated, we first had to move through the personal nature of race, language, and power. We had to create time and space to talk about our personal experiences in classrooms, schools, and relationships. This was intense, and conversations and dialogue became more difficult to listen to and engage in because what had been invisible to me had obviously been visible to some of my peers for quite some time. I often left class Friday and Saturday evenings feeling mentally and emotionally exhausted.

As we began, over the course, to critique ourselves, we also began to acknowledge the ways we were all both victims and perpetrators in the systems of whiteness. This course engaged me in difficult, but rich dialogue. McIntyre (1997) acknowledges the role of "critical friends" for "White people who are committed to engaging in a process of individual, institutional, and social

change around issues of racism and whiteness" (p. 41). Through this course, I feel I have made such friends, and plan to continue the conversations we have begun.

Dionne

Cross-racial conversations about race can be emotional, difficult, and result in miscommunications because of varying cultural and communicational codes. Chambers (2002) writes, "A system of apartheid without segregation is one in which people share cultural 'space' but communication between them is seriously muffled" (p.189). Thus, tensions arose early on in the course.
On the second day of class, during a presentation given by two of my White peers who were discussing various dimensions of the concept of whiteness, I asked another White female peer in the class if she could define what she saw as the difference between race and ethnicity. At this point, the instructor, Dr. Carter interjected and began answering my question. I interrupted and informed her that I knew the definition of race and ethnicity due to my bachelor's degree in African American and African Diaspora Studies, but I was more interested in hearing my White female classmate's definition of the two key terms. At that point, revealed in later conversations, she acknowledged my agenda was obvious. I wanted her to answer this question because she was White. In later discussions, Dr. Carter tried to problematize my statement, asking me to insert myself in my statement, attempting to try and get me to see how my question might be considered violent if it had been asked of me in this way by a White person.

When asked to look at my statement through this lens, I can see how it could be taken in that manner because I am all too aware of the way in which racialized questions can be destructive and painful. However, I do not apologize for the question because it brought out racialized dynamics and tensions that are all too common in the classroom that happen in reverse (White on Black) consistently in academia. More than anything, I have been upset by the way in which my question was perceived to make my peer the spokesperson for her race, when in fact, because I have been positioned in this way multiple times; this was not the intended effect, especially since these conversations are so rare. Moreover, what was disturbing was the way in which one hint of emotional and psychic violence (which is inflicted on students of color all of the time) directed towards a White student was immediately disciplined. The gaze of Blackness has the startling effect of producing apprehension, anxiety, guilt, shame, and discomfort on the part of some of the White students during conversations examining race, especially when they gain a new consciousness concerning the dynamics of power and

privilege involved in whiteness. In situations such as these, it is unavoidable that Black students will become frustrated, while White students experience having the "privileges of normalcy and unexaminedness" taken away (Chambers, 2002, p.189). This exchange in our classroom created a rare space where White students also became marked and the privileges that they received examinable.

Upon entering the course, my expectation was that the School of Education would be less hypersensitive about discussing whiteness. Instead, I found that my instructor, Dr. Carter, chose to pace the unpacking of whiteness in a way which I found frustrating and, at times, in my view, protected and pacified whiteness. Although I still struggle with the exchange that I had with my White female peer and Dr. Carter, I realize that the opportunity to unpack whiteness is an alluring and radical basis for a course at the university level.

Susan

Using whiteness as a lens through which dialogue and reflection on political issues, race, personal identity, and social structures challenged me throughout this course. This course forced me to look introspectively about how I am implicated in perpetuating whiteness. McIntosh (1988) describes this when she writes, "I was taught to recognize racism only in individual acts of meanness by members of my group, never in invisible systems conferring unsought racial dominance on my group from birth" (McIntosh, 1988. p.1).

I recall during one of the first class meetings, the class dividing into groups and trying to define whiteness. I remember one of my classmates describing whiteness as an "untouchable air" that you can see when a White person walks into an all Black neighborhood and everyone stares as if this White person does not belong. I argued that while this White person may receive second glances in the Black neighborhood, they can be accepted into the neighborhood. Their money is good at the local convenience mart, whereas this may not be the case with a Black person walking into an all White neighborhood. In my recollection of the discussion, I saw the differences, but did not see the similarities as my classmate described.

In taking other courses that covered the subject of race when topics regarding past or current injustices towards Blacks or Latinos were discussed, it was much easier to dismiss these injustices as happening because of those "racist White people." The different lens in this course forced me to see how I am a part of "whiteness." There are certain assumptions that come with my being a White woman. These assumptions have afforded me privileges that otherwise I

may not have received. For instance, I never thought of myself as being perceived as non-threatening just because I am White and female.

In retrospect after completing the class, I have learned to better understand the assumptions that come along with my appearance. Prior to this class, I was disheartened and felt at a loss as to how to challenge whiteness. However, I have come to realize that my efforts as a person can help combat these negative assumptions on an individual basis. Through discussing whiteness, I have become more aware and more sensitive about issues and concerns in greater society.

Frank

I wasn't aware of my whiteness until I was caught up in a high school football brawl with another Southern Indiana high school team. My team had two African-American teammates and during the brawl our opponents hurled racial epithets at them. They continued throwing racial epithets at them throughout the entire game. After the game had been decided in our favor, one of our White teammates decided to defend their honor, and after a vicious, bench-clearing brawl, we were hurried to our bus and were escorted out of town by police.

After college, I taught in diverse public high schools in Indianapolis, suburban Washington D.C, and Charleston, SC, and in homogeneous school environments in southern Indiana as well. I returned to graduate school to figure out why schools aren't quite "getting it right." In retrospect, I realize that whiteness was everywhere in the school systems in which I taught, but I couldn't quite articulate what it was. Peter McLaren (1998) writes:

> Whiteness is a sociohistorical form of consciousness, given birth at the nexus of capitalism, colonial rule, and the emergent Relationships among dominant and subordinate groups. Whiteness constitutes and demarcates ideas, feelings, knowledge, social practices, cultural formations, and systems of intelligibility that are identified or attributed to White people and that are invested in by White people as White (p. 66).

Through this course, I have begun to understand the tensions I feel about my masculine and White identities, as they have often collided with other identities that have been marginalized by whiteness. I was the only White male in Dr. Carter's whiteness class. To say I felt uncomfortable at times would be an understatement. But, discomfort is necessary. Tension was a constant part of my existence in the whiteness course because there was often a divide and a

palpable tension between class members and myself. The readings and the discussions made this inevitable and led us down paths toward not just intellectual understanding, but also to places of identity formation. Further, I continue to question and critique my own experiences by asking questions such as: How much has whiteness affected my ability to think critically and in multiple ways? What are the new models and paradigms for social justice and critical inquiry and how is whiteness explicitly addressed within these models and paradigms?

As a White male, I need to actively engage in critical self-examination. Thus, it is important that Whites engage in critical examination for a broader, fairer model of learning and social justice to emerge. Lipsitz (1995, p. 72) states, "What good is it to fight against White supremacy unless Whites themselves join the struggle?" Hopefully, my contribution to this expanding and exciting discussion will be to call on Whites to "understand the ways in which our cultural practices and meaning making re-inscribes and naturalizes White supremacy" (Lipsitz, 1995, p. 72).

Closing Discussion

As noted in the students' reflections, discussing whiteness creates tensions that can be overwhelming to some students and produce a variety of responses and behaviors (cf., Watt, 2007). It is only by examining and critiquing our own experiences with whiteness that we are able to consciously address privilege and move the conversation forward. Providing students with opportunities to reflect on their own experiences was an essential part of engaging in a difficult dialogue on whiteness. My role as a Black female instructor was complex, but an important one that sought to facilitate a dialogue that challenged students as well as me to put ourselves in our statements (Power, Morton, Shuart, Otto & Bloome, 2000). The PIE model was useful as it provided a lens to better understand the various reactions that students had as they engaged in difficult discussions.

What is problematic is that the dialogues that occurred in the whiteness class are not likely to happen in classes where the topic is not central. Instead, more often than not, such dialogues are reduced to silencing. When difficult dialogues are silenced, students are left with a sense of fear and/or entitlement that allows them to deny or deflect and justify their responses instead of interrogating and confronting them. We suggest that to avoid silencing and/or shutting down difficult dialogues, student affairs practitioners:

- Interrogate the various ways that privilege functions within their own lives and experiences.
- Facilitate an environment of respect in which students can reflect on their own experiences.
- Facilitate an environment where students hold each other accountable by questioning and challenging each others' comments and ideas.
- Be willing to find comfort in discomfort as difficult dialogues often breed tension and intense emotions.
- Listen and pay attention. In particular, listen to the silences. Non-verbal communication, such as body language and eye movements, are often the initial entry points of difficult conversations.

In today's world of global expansion and growing diversity, difficult dialogues are a necessity if schools and colleges of education want to prepare students who embrace cultural plurality, encourage cross-cultural discourse and envision initial 'difficult dialogues' as potential antecedents for enhanced multicultural communication, understanding and respect.

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