

Engaging Preservice Teachers in Critical Dialogues on Race

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Abstract

Rarely do White, middle-class Americans, the population from which most teachers are drawn, have the opportunity to consider themselves as racialized beings. Although personal experience is usually the best teacher, our increasingly homogeneous teaching population oftentimes lacks experience with diversity, and schools of education often struggle to find appropriate and meaningful diverse field experiences for their teacher candidates. This study uses a documentary in an attempt to provoke thoughtful conversations about race and racism in the United States among the mostly White teacher candidates. The study identifies racial themes that emerge from the conversations, explores the ways the groups' racial diversity alters conversations on race, and explores how the race of the group's facilitator may affect the conversations. The study suggested that racially diverse groups are more likely to explore greater numbers of racial themes and engage each other more deeply through polite disagreement. Although racial diversity of any kind seemed to promote deeper conversations, participants reported greater satisfaction from the conversations when the students themselves were racially diverse rather than with the facilitator alone.

Keywords

diversity and multiculturalism, social sciences, teacher education, disparities, education, educational research, race

Teacher preparation institutions have been charged with the responsibility of creating positive environments where the understanding of diversity can flourish (Ambe, 2006), but there continues to be considerable debate regarding how best to do this. Can race discussions in university settings help future teachers critically examine their assumptions, beliefs, and stereotypes about race? This study uses a documentary to instigate race discussions among students in a preservice teacher education program enrolled in an undergraduate diversity course.

The Color of Fear (Wah, 1995), a film about the state of race relations in America, portrays the emotional journey of eight North American men of Asian, European, Latino, and African descent as they confront the realities of their racial experiences during a weekend retreat. Through a series of conversations led by a facilitator, the men reveal the pain that racism has caused them and develop a deeper sense of understanding and trust among racially different men. The first half of the film focuses on White privilege and racism between White people and people of color historically and today. The second half of the film shifts to focus on racism among and between people of color, but ultimately situates interethnic racism within the context and history of White privilege. Despite the film being released almost 20 years ago, it continues to be powerful and pertinent given today's racial climate in the United States.

This video was selected in an attempt to provoke thoughtful conversations among the mostly White teacher candidates about race issues in hopes of illuminating the following questions:

- What themes emerge from conversations about this film on racism?
- In what ways might the racial diversity of the discussion group alter the conversations?
- In what ways might the race of the facilitator affect the themes of the conversations by the viewing groups?

This study attempts to answer these questions.

Justification

U.S. population demographics continue to become increasingly diverse. Between 1980 and 2008, the percentage of Whites in comparison with the total population declined

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14% (from 80% to 66%). At the same time, the Hispanic population increased 9% (from 6% to 15%), and the Black population remained steady at about 12% of the total population (Aud, Fox, & KewalRamani, 2010). During the same time, we also saw a resegregation in the public schools along racial lines (Cohen & Lotan, 2004). With the increasing diversity among students, however, we see an increasing homogenization of the teacher workforce in U.S. schools where the majority of teachers are female, White, and middle-class (Hardy, 2004; G. R. Howard, 2006; Kozol, 2005; Orfield & Lee, 2004), and according to Howey and Zimpher (1999), preservice teacher education continues to offer a “romantic and facile notion of inquiry and reflection” (p. 279) allowing graduates to believe teaching is somehow without complexity. The questions of how we are going to address this issue and what role a formal teacher education program can play remain.

Terminology

The term *race* is problematic. In this study, race refers to a socially constructed category based on phenotypical characteristics. Race is used not as a biological construct, but as a “lived experience” (Goodman, 2006). The terms *African American* and *Black* are used interchangeably throughout the discussion though it is recognized that these two terms, although often overlapping in the United States, are not synonymous. Most often, Caucasian students referred to themselves as White, although in the film, the term *European American* was also included. All participants in the study and in the film self-selected the racial identification terms that felt most accurate, and most also used these terms interchangeably.

The term *diversity* in educational research can encompass a wide variety of labels applied to individuals who are identified as belonging to a particular group with shared characteristics. These may include racial, ethnic, linguistic, religious, sexuality, academic, socioeconomic, and/or physical categories among others. All individuals are situated in an intersectionality of identities (McCann & Kim, 2002), and no dimension can be fully understood in isolation (Jones & McEwen, 2000). This study is an examination only of perceptions regarding race and racism emerging from deliberate facilitated conversations.

Review of the Literature

Teacher Perceptions and Expectations

Many classroom teachers understand their ultimate responsibility in the classroom is to teach students and transmit information in effective ways (Howey & Zimpher, 1999); few would dispute that a good education is essential for later success in life, and most educators, parents, politicians, and the general public recognize that the education system works better for some children than others.

Why is this the case? Some educators attribute achievement imbalances to the students’ families: their socioeconomic levels, lack of involvement in the schools, and/or limited (middle-class) cultural experiences. Although there may be little debate that children living in poverty experience lower school achievement than those living in middle- or high-income homes (Kozol, 1991; Orfield, 2000), there are many examples of successful low-income, minority students in schools across the country indicating that poverty is not the only issue of significance.

Teachers who have high expectations for all students and motivate learning through culturally relevant teaching have students who learn at high levels (Ai, 2002; Alder, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Turner & Patrick, 2004). Some studies indicate that teachers’ beliefs have a significant impact on students’ learning and overall school experience (Ambe, 2006; Delpit, 1995). “When teachers underestimate minority students’ academic abilities, and assign them less challenging tasks,” says Ambe (2006), “they limit these students’ chances of achieving at their highest potential” (p. 4). She adds, “Measures that seek to improve educational outcomes for diverse learners should therefore be directly linked to teachers and the ways in which they are trained” (p. 4).

Although many teachers attest to a strategy of colorblind teaching, or pretending that all students are the same, multicultural educators disagree with this method. Sue (2006) explains,

The pretense by White Americans that they do not see color is motivated by the need to appear free of bias and prejudice, fears that what they say or do may appear racist or as an attempt to cover up hidden biases . . . To be color blind not only denies the central importance of racial differences in the psychological experience of minorities (racism and discrimination), but also allows the White person to deny how his or her whiteness intrudes upon the person of color. (p. 12)

Sleeter, in an interview by Miner and Peterson (2000-2001), agreed colorblind strategies to educational equality may provide an education equal to that of White students, but certainly will not provide an equitable education. That requires the critical examination of the White, Eurocentric culture of schooling.

Banks and Banks (1995) push for a teacher mind-set of equity pedagogy. Equity pedagogy, they explain, requires teachers to modify their teaching so that students from diverse racial, cultural, gender, or social-class groups achieve at high levels. Critical race theorists, multicultural education theorists, and critical pedagogues agree that important social issues cannot be ignored in the classroom (Bennett, 2001, 2006; Delpit, 1995; Gay, 2000), and students should be encouraged to develop their ethnic identities and be taught in a manner that is meaningful. After all, a student’s color and culture are essential and important parts of who they are as human beings.

Preservice Teacher Education

How should teacher educators go about having critical discussions about race with preservice teachers, and can these discussions positively affect student learning? Goodwin (1997) has argued that changes in teacher education have been largely reactive; instead of rethinking the philosophy and practice of teacher education, appendages have simply been added to deal with the “problem” of diversity. Goodwin explains that American education continues to promote White, middle-class values and perspectives. In addition, the system continues to associate multiethnic or multicultural education with “minority” education, and, despite cultural “training,” teachers continue to promote Eurocentric values and fail to address the larger issues of structural inequalities or oppression. “Teacher educators must reconceptualize the manner in which new teachers are prepared, and provide them with the skills and knowledge that will be best suited for effectively educating today’s diverse student population” (Howard, 2003, p. 195).

Conversations about race and racism provide an entry point into the examination of bias, but are often uncomfortable and therefore avoided in social and academic situations. Sue (2013) describes three reasons for this: politeness protocols, which indicate that uncomfortable topics should be avoided or addressed only superficially; academic protocols, which suggest that objectivity and detachment are essential components of the academy and emotional reactions are to be avoided; and colorblind protocols, which avoid “seeing” race as a means to reduce the threat of being labeled a racist.

A preservice multicultural education curriculum with a critical, social justice orientation promoting equity in education rather than equality may provide a bridge between the life experiences of the largely White, female, middle-class teaching population and that of their students. Morey and Kitano (1997) encourage a multicultural curriculum that promotes “a more comprehensive, accurate, intellectually honest view of reality . . . and better meets the learning needs of all students” (p. 12). Although conversations about race and racism have the potential to feel threatening (Sue et al., 2011), successful race dialogue can dispel stereotypes and misinformation (Bolgatz, 2005; Pasque, Chesler, Charbeneau, & Carlson, 2013), decrease fear, and increase compassion, appreciation of others, and a sense of connectedness (Bell, 2003; Sue, 2003). It is essential that teacher educators are not only allowing but also designing their programs to promote honest and open dialogue within the university classroom to better prepare their students to later do the same within their own classrooms. Several methodological possibilities to promote such dialogue exist.

Cochran-Smith (1995) encourages the use of reflection of teacher candidates’ own ideas about race to construct uncertainty. She uses candidates’ stories as a basis to analyze and reconstruct race in society and schools. She emphasizes that

teachers need to fundamentally change the Eurocentric way they think about race and education, and this knowledge cannot be transmitted but must be created by the student. This can prove difficult to achieve. As Ladson-Billings (1991) warns teacher candidates in multicultural education programs can distance themselves from historical and social reality. Teacher educators must find a way to guide candidates through race discussions in such a way that they reconstruct their own racial realities while reducing their self-distancing behavior.

Rarely do White, middle-class Americans, the population from which most teachers are drawn, have the opportunity to consider themselves as racialized beings. Some studies indicate that most Whites link racism with personal prejudice; as they do not feel they are prejudiced against others, they do not consider the issue of racism as an important personal issue. They fail to see how their race has benefited them at the possible expense of non-Whites (Howard, 2006).

Sue, Torino, Capodilupo, and Rivera (2009) discuss the difficulty individuals have in addressing racial issues. “Any individual or group engaged in a difficult dialogue may feel at risk for potentially disclosing intimate thoughts, beliefs, or feelings related to the topic of race” (p. 184). White students and students of color may find themselves reacting in powerful ways. Sue et al. (2009) describe the possible negative reactions of individuals as falling in three domains: cognitive (i.e., peer perceptions or negative consequences such as isolation), behavioral (eye rolling, crying, withdrawing, turning red), or emotional (incensed, anxious, or exhausted). Students of color reported feeling often as though their integrity was being questioned by fellow students and reported White students tended to deflect or avoid conversations that proved difficult. They suggest that facilitators can improve the comfort levels of students during such conversations in part by supporting and validating the students’ thoughts and stories and through increasing their knowledge of racial issues and dialogue.

Tatum (1992) urges facilitators to be cautious as students begin to explore the reality of racism and their privilege within the system. She writes, “The introduction of these issues of oppression often generates powerful emotional responses in students that range from guilt and shame to anger and despair” (pp. 1-2). She warns that not addressing these emotional responses can lead to resistance in students. She adds,

Such resistance can ultimately interfere with the cognitive understanding and mastery of the material. This resistance and potential interference is particularly common when specifically addressing issues of race and racism. Yet, when students are given the opportunity to explore race-related material in the classroom where both their affective and intellectual responses are acknowledged and addressed, their level of understanding is greatly enhanced. (p. 2)

Sleeter (Miner & Peterson, 2000-2001) encourages a sense of disequilibrium in students. If White students think of racism in overly simplistic terms, they will minimize the phenomenon. Teacher candidates must be convinced that racism is institutionalized, common, pervasive, and ignored to become agents of social justice in the classroom and demand excellence from all students through culturally relevant teaching.

Film Selection

The video, *The Color of Fear*, was chosen for this study because it illustrates the journey of several individuals as they begin to understand and honestly discuss the depths of racism in the United States. In a previous study using this video (Berlak, 1999), preservice teachers recorded their thoughts in a journal writing the following:

- Kathy (White, female): “After seeing this video, which was tremendously emotional experience for me, I was open to discuss issues of racial inequality in society, particularly in the classroom” (Berlak, 1999, p. 4).
- Julia (Filipino, female): “The movie evoked sympathetic emotions” (Berlak, 1999, p. 7).
- Isaiah (African American, male): “Damn, *The Color of Fear*, realism, fear, anger. What to do? Can I do this job? Where can I buy that tape (of the film)?” (Berlak, 1999, p. 9).

The powerful, honest nature of this film seems to trigger emotional responses from viewers and was a powerful component to the development of my race consciousness.

Although personal experience is usually the best teacher, in the United States, our increasingly homogeneous teaching population oftentimes lacks experience with diversity, and schools of education often struggle to find appropriate and meaningful diverse field experiences for their teacher candidates. The possibility of an emotional connection with the men in this film was the primary reason it was selected for the study. It provides an opportunity for students to observe the changes in understandings of the men in the film. This film is intended to “construct uncertainty” (Cochran-Smith, 1995) in the understandings of race in the minds of the teacher candidates; it encourages candidates to examine the meaning of Whiteness and refuses them the comfort of distancing themselves from the issue (Ladson-Billings, 1991). Twenty years after its release, the content of the film is still relevant in a nation still grappling with the meaning of race. Teacher candidates in previous courses consistently refer to the film as a turning point in their understandings of race and racism in the United States.

Conceptual Framework

At the foundation of this study, there is an assumption that individuals are socialized beings who can alter the way they view others through careful reflection, and that many White

people have been socialized toward racism but have not developed a sense of themselves as racialized beings. Race is a label and experience reserved for those perceived as “Others” rather than of themselves. The concept of White identity development theory underlies this idea as it attempts to describe the process by which many White individuals come to understand themselves as racial beings (Harris, 1993). Several theorists have proposed developmental stages, but all describe a process by which a White person moves from a position of racism to a positive White consciousness (Hardiman, 1982; Helms, 1997). An underlying assumption of White identity development is that increasing race consciousness will lead to a more critical understanding of the persistence of racism and the role White people do and can play in perpetuating or ending racism.

It is important to note that White identity development as a process has been challenged as overly prescriptive and abstract (LaFleur, Rowe, & Leach, 2002; Rowe, Behrens, & Leach, 1995; Rowe, Bennett, & Atkinson, 1994). The White racial consciousness model has identified and labeled “constellations of attitudes” (LaFleur, Rowe, & Leach, 2002, p. 149) expressed by White individuals. Both the theory of White identity development and the model of White racial consciousness move the conversation on Whiteness and race forward. The video used in this study demonstrates the move of one White individual, David, from denial of racism to an understanding of White privilege.

Method

This study was conducted at a large Midwestern university. Participants were preservice teachers enrolled in a course designed to help participants think more critically about diversity in general, although the instructor of this particular section focused primarily on racism. Students were initially assigned to one of five film discussion groups meeting within the same week of the semester. However, inclement weather necessitated that several sessions be rescheduled for later in the semester. The result of this change meant that Student Groups 4 and 5 were participating in their multicultural education course about a month longer than Groups 1, 2, and 3 prior to participating in the discussion group.

Study Participants

The sample is comprised of 21 teacher candidates (see Table 1). Each participant was enrolled in the same course devoted to preparing teachers to work with diverse students. All had declared education as either their major or as an area of interest. Ninety-five percent of the participants were interested in teaching secondary education. All of the students were between the ages of 19 and 23; 7 men participated in the study, and the other 14 participants were female. Three students self-identified as Black. Two were African American, and 1 participant had emigrated from the Caribbean during high school; the other 18 students identified as White.

Table 1. Description of Group Composition.

	Number of participants	Race/gender of participants	Race of facilitator
Group 1	3	2 White males 1 White female	White
Group 2	4	2 White males 1 White female 1 Black female	White
Group 3	3	1 White male 2 White females	Black
Group 4	4	2 White males 2 White female	Black
Group 5	7	1 White male 1 Black male 4 White females 1 Black female	White

Each student was assigned to a group based on his or her availability. Table 1 describes the racial and gender demographic of each discussion group.

Only in one group did all participants and the instructor self-identify as White. The other four groups had at least two races represented. For ease of interpretation, the following codes will be used when discussing group demographics: “W” for White, “B” for Black, “m” for male, “F” for female, and “F” for facilitator.

Data Collection

Three data collection tools were used to better understand the experiences of the participants in this study: An entrance survey, transcriptions of the discussions, and exit surveys were completed and analyzed.

Each participant completed a written entrance survey on arrival to the study location. Survey questions sought information regarding individuals’ prior experiences with diversity (i.e., “*Was the community in which you grew up racially diverse?*” and “*Have you had opportunities to discuss race and/or racial issues in a formal setting while attending the university?*”) and general attitudinal dispositions toward diversity (i.e., “*After graduation, how willing are you to teach in a diverse setting?*” and “*How important is it for teachers to be knowledgeable about race and/or race issues?*”). The survey was intended to obtain an initial understanding of students’ beliefs about and prior experience(s) with race and racism in a confidential manner before viewing the video.

The participants then viewed the film, *The Color of Fear*. Following the video, conversations were facilitated to illicit their reflections on the themes and issues in the film. Each group was assigned either a White or African American facilitator. Both facilitators were female; one was the author of this article. After viewing the video, facilitators initiated the conversation about the video by asking several general questions

to stimulate the discussion. Questions asked for reactions on specific issues and/or people in the film such as the following:

- “Was there a certain character in the film to whom you most related?”
- “Was there anything said with which you strongly agreed or disagreed?”
- “Do you think the discussion was an honest portrayal of racism in the United States today? How so?”

Although the facilitators had a general list of questions, each attempted to allow conversations to progress naturally asking additional questions only to prevent the conversation from stagnating prematurely. Facilitators were provided with a standard protocol and list of questions so that individual variation between facilitators, beyond race, was less likely to influence the conversation. These conversations were video-taped and later transcribed to protect the identities of participants.

Finally, students completed an exit survey prior to leaving the study location. This survey focused more on the participants’ experiences during the discussion including their level of (dis)comfort and their willingness to participate in the discussion. This survey also served as a validity check allowing participants to share thoughts and reactions to the documentary privately that they might have been unwilling or unable to share in the group setting allowing for a level of triangulation. The survey would provide an opportunity to examine discrepancies between the oral and written responses to the film allowing for further study. Entrance and exit surveys were confidential, although each was labeled in a way that entrance and exit surveys of any particular participant could be compared.

Data Analysis

The entrance and exit surveys for all groups were compared. Each small group was studied individually, compared with the other small groups, and compared with the entire sample. In addition, the transcripts of the discussions for each group were coded manually, first descriptively and then the emergent themes from each group identified. The themes were then refined categorically. The categories and themes from each group were compared. The themes and categories that emerged from each conversation, the depth of coverage these received, and how others in the group responded to the theme or category were of interest.

Findings

Entrance Surveys

Analysis of entrance surveys indicated approximately half of students considered themselves to be very open to having their ideas challenged and participating in race discussions.

The rest were slightly more reserved with two feeling highly uncomfortable with the idea of discussing race. Entrance surveys suggested that 12 of the students planned to teach in a diverse setting after completing their teaching certification, 2 did not plan to teach in a diverse setting, and 6 were uncertain. Exactly half of the students felt race was a critical issue in the United States today, and only two reported that race required only little to some focus in education. No one reported that it was of no importance.

Seventeen students reported that their home communities had little to no diversity represented, but a fourth of students reported that their close friends were highly diverse and represented several racial groups; half reported having a few friends of a racial group other than their own, two students had at least one friend of a different race, and three reported having no friends from other racial groups.

Approximately one third of the students reported attending schools that were somewhat diverse (30%-50% of the students representing non-White races), one third reported slightly diverse student populations (70%-90% of the students represented a single race), and one third reported attending schools with little racial diversity (less than 10% of the students were classified as a non-majority race). Only 1 student reported having attended a school that was highly diverse (more than 50% but not more than 70% of students as having non-White races).

Regarding experiences discussing race and race issues, just more than half of the students reported that they have occasionally had opportunities to discuss race prior to coming to college. A third reported rarely having such an opportunity. One student reported never having opportunities to discuss race, whereas another reported often doing so. In the college setting, half of the participants reported often having the opportunity to discuss race; the other half occasionally had opportunities; only two reported that they rarely had the opportunity to discuss race.

Of those discussions on race, almost half of the students felt as if the discussions were an essential part of challenging their racial assumptions and worldviews, half felt as if they were important but not particularly challenging to their understanding, and one student felt as if they had not been influential at all. All except three students reported these discussions occurred in racially diverse groups. Two students reported feeling invigorated by these past conversations, a third felt uncomfortable when discussions were "too intense," and one reported feeling very uncomfortable and afraid of saying the wrong thing.

Overall, the entrance surveys between the students who would be in the discussion groups with the White facilitator versus the African American facilitator were fairly similar (within a single response for most questions); the only variations worth noting were on the following questions:

All of the students in the two groups with the African American facilitator self-reported as White; two of the

three groups led by the White facilitator had at least one participant self-identifying as African American, and one group was all White.

Four of the seven participants in the groups with the African American facilitator reported having never or rarely participated in race discussions; all of the participants in groups with the White facilitator reported that they had often or occasionally participated in discussions about race.

Given the small sample size, it is impossible to identify the significance these differences may have had on the conversations.

Facilitated Discussion

The transcripts of each discussion were analyzed for themes. Initial codes emerged organically and then organized categorically. As themes emerged, a label was selected that described the categorical theme. The themes from the various groups were then compared with those of other groups. Five overarching, and often interrelated, categories emerged from the groups' discussions. These include (a) White privilege, (b) White guilt, (c) discomfort, (d) absence of a cultural consciousness, and (e) powerlessness.

In this study, the label *White privilege* is defined as "the rights, advantages, and protections enjoyed by some at the expense of and beyond the rights, advantages, and protections available to others" (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012, p. 58). This label was applied when participants discussed the ideas of power and privilege around race. The term *White guilt* refers to the feeling of guilt or shame some White individuals feel when faced with the understanding or concept of White privilege. The label *discomfort* referred to instances in which participants indicated they felt uncomfortable due to a situation or conversational topic. The term *absence of cultural consciousness* was selected to describe occurrences where participants referred to not having a culture or wishing for a culture with which to identify. Finally, the term *powerlessness* referred to a communicated sense of helplessness in the face of institutional racism or privilege.

Table 2 provides an overview of the specific topics brought up by the various groups. The group discussing each topic is labeled by the number in the second column. These numbers correspond with the groups identified in Table 1. Some themes could fit under several different categories; however, I attempted to place them where I felt they most closely "fit." It is important to note two individuals from the documentary were frequently discussed by the participants: David and Victor. David is a White male who demonstrated resistance to understanding the experience of non-Whites in the United States today. He blamed the non-White males for their own struggles and, at least initially, failed to accept their concerns. The other men spent a lot of their time trying to help David understand their perspectives. Victor was an

Table 2. Themes and Categories.

Themes	Groups
Ignorance of White privilege	
• David was picked on, “attacked,” or misunderstood	1, 2 ^a , 3, 5
• David wasn’t really racist, but just sounded like it because he didn’t know better	1, 2 ^a
• Everyone is a little bit racist	1
• Most racism by Whites is committed out of ignorance	3
• There isn’t a difference between racism White to non-White and racism within or between non-White groups	1, 5
• It is about the individual not racism against a group	1, 4
• Everyone should have equal chances (anti-affirmative action)	3
• Sense of other races being “oversensitive” or misinterpreting things as racist when they weren’t	1, 3
• We’re all the same	1, 4
• Ignorance of harm being done as somehow “better” than intentional racism	2
• Whites as victims of racism	1, 3
Recognition of White privilege	
• Sense of understanding where Victor’s anger was coming from	3
• In university setting feeling like an African American loses identity	2
• Lack of academically successful African American role models	2
• Sense that White privilege exists in ways that most people never see or recognize	2, 5
• Affirmative action as just response to inequalities	2
• Understand group’s frustration with David’s obliviousness to racism	2, 3, 5
• White guilt	
• White students wanting a sense of culture or of being different from mainstream White American culture	2
• Being uncomfortable associating as White	3, 4
• Never having considered White and American as separate	2, 3, 4, 5
• I don’t want to be “American” or White	2
• Sense of regret over not understanding racism earlier	5
Discomfort discussing race	
• Sense that they can’t be honest because they’ll be interpreted as a racist	1, 3
• African American expressing fear of discussion among all-White group	2
• Discomfort with Victor’s anger	3, 4
• Search for cultural consciousness	
• Sense of White isolation	2, 3, 4
• Sense of being stripped of an ethnic culture	2, 3
• Never considered “White” an ethnic group	2, 4, 5
Sense of helplessness/uncertainty	
• Situation as unlikely to change anytime soon (i.e., White teachers go back where they came from so there won’t be a change)	2
• How do you teach an all-White class that they are “White” not just “American?”	2, 4
• Race discussions can’t occur (or very difficult) in “real” ways among all-White groups	2, 3, 4
• Race discussions must occur in all-White settings—we don’t get the full story	3, 4, 5

^aIndicates that the statement was challenged by a fellow participant leading to the person/people making the statement to alter their stated perspective.

African American male who expressed great frustration with David and would occasionally raise his voice to try to get his point across.

Emerging Themes and Categories

There was significant overlapping of themes emerging between groups as a whole although Group 1 had the least number of themes emerging. Participants in this group generally supported each other’s viewpoints and did not verbally disagree with other group members during the discussion and seemed to have the most resistance to the idea of White privilege. It is impossible to say whether this is the result of the racial make-up of the group being all White, some coincidence of the group configuration, or a result of this discussion group being held earlier in the semester during which they were enrolled in their diversity course. Perhaps if these students viewed the video later in the semester, their reaction would have been somehow different.

White privilege. There was a continuum of understanding of White privilege represented by the various conversations from denial or ignorance of its existence to insightful understanding and recognition. Although these themes emerged in various forms among almost all of the discussion groups, what does seem to be different is how these views were or were not challenged within the group. One participant in Group 1 (all-White participants and facilitator) illustrated one end of the continuum when he said,

I knew where [David] was coming from because he feels some of the things I feel and talks about them, but he’s not a racist like I’m not a racist but the things he says on the video sometimes came across as racist, you know. That’s what African Americans and Chicanos might think.

No one challenged his view of David as “not a racist.”

Another student in the same group recognized his White privilege but then said that his words were very likely to be “misinterpreted as racist” making it difficult for him to talk about race at all. He then added, “A lot of us actually came from someplace else, we’re immigrants, you know. Unless you’re Native American then we came from someplace else.” He then discussed how people of color were racist against Whites, too. The first person added, “It seems like everyone has some kind of racism in them.” This group seemed to hold conflicting beliefs that they nor David were racist and, contradictorily, that everyone was racist; there seemed to be no obvious understanding of how Whiteness had privileged them or how these ideas might support or contradict each other.

Discomfort. Several students expressed discomfort with the emotional responses exhibited by individuals in the film when racism was discussed. Several students discussed

Victor's frustrated response to David. A White female in another group (one Wm, two Wf, BF) began by describing people's discomfort with race discussions:

I think people would be afraid to appear ignorant, like people would be like, oh, my God, why did that, like, I can't believe that came out of your mouth. And I mean, it is such a touchy subject because you don't want to appear stupid or have people attack you; and like that guy [Victor] screaming at you for a good two minutes. I would just be like be afraid to like say something else that would make him furious.

Another White female (two Wm, one Wf, BF) said, "I had trouble concentrating on what [Victor] was saying because I was focused on how he was reacting, and, um, I was kind of thinking . . . oh my gosh, he needs to calm down a little." Several other participants commented on David "being attacked."

In groups with African American/Black participants, viewpoints were often challenged by fellow participants, both Black and White, which further spurred discussion, and greater understanding was expressed. In one group (four Wf, one Bf, one Wm, one Bm and WF), a similar comment regarding David being "attacked" was made; however, the conversation took a very different path as other students challenged that idea eventually leading to a different conclusion. For example, a White female said that she did not like how they were all yelling at David: "I just felt like they were attacking him." The Black female participant responded by explaining the group's frustration: "But I think they were getting frustrated with him because he kept on . . . saying the same thing and they didn't know how to get it across—like talking to a brick wall."

Two White females continued to discuss the "attack" on David and how they did not understand why the same people yelling at David were so calm when they discussed the intra-group racism. The Black male attempted to explain:

I think part of the problem with them becoming frustrated and hollering is that being raised as a Black person, you, I guess, automatically think White people know what they're doing when they really don't. They don't see it as racism. They have been raised to think that way as children and everything so, it's more that they're not trying to be that way but they're raised that way. So we think they know what they're doing but they have no idea. That is why they got so upset that they had to keep saying is over and over and over again because he kept blowing it off like it was not real, like it was a problem with them and everything. They already, they believed that he already knew what he was doing; I know that is like how I feel. I know, like when I was growing up being around a lot of Black people, it's like, everybody just automatically thinks that White people know what they're doing already and they're trying to do it to you or something like that and it is just not that they're accidentally doing it to you or something.

The facilitator noted that David was invalidating the experiences of the people of color in the video and how that

may have resulted in their increased frustration. One of the White females responded, "I think that is a good point because like if someone said to me that I was wrong about an experience then I would be really mad about that." In this case, the diverse experiences of the group members and their willingness to disagree enriched the conversation and took the conversation to a more nuanced level.

The difference in conversation styles described above seemed common. Although it is impossible to identify trends with so few groups, it is interesting to note that the conversations seemed more engaging and challenging in groups in which the students themselves were racially diverse. Whether it was a concern over stunting the conversation, wanting to see where the candidates would take the conversation without interference, or simply that the candidates were more willing to agree with points made by the facilitator versus a fellow student, groups with racially diverse students had longer and seemingly more engaging conversations characterized by more disagreements than the racially homogeneous group (two Wm, one Wf, and WF) or the two groups with White students and a Black facilitator.

White guilt and cultural consciousness. The awareness of White privilege, White guilt, and cultural consciousness were themes that greatly overlapped. Participants with a greater understanding of White privilege often hinted at a sense of White guilt and a feeling of loss regarding the "absence" of a culture. They expressed a desire for a connection to a culture but either felt such a connection did not exist or found "White American" culture to elicit a sense of shame.

The African American facilitator asked one group (two Wm, one Wf) whether they thought there was a "White experience" and, if so, to describe it. A White male responded, "What do you mean exactly by White experience? Do you mean values that make me White?" He tried to explain his position:

Well, I think that is a hard question and not something we really want to think about because the White experience in this nation is one of oppression and we don't really want to think about that and one thing that comes through the video is that the White experience hasn't been understood and it is uncomfortable.

Another group with the White facilitator (two Wm, one Wf, one Bf) was asked a similar question. Another White male responded,

I've never thought of myself as a member of an ethnic group. I mean, I've always wanted to have that or something, but I don't know—I mean, the White people became White Americans. I mean, you bring someone who is first generation from Russia [and] they'll have a different perspective, but they're still White. I mean I think some us want to have some sort of identity that is not American. I mean, I don't want to be American. There is so much I don't want to be a part of. I mean, slavery—I mean I wasn't a part of that. My family came here after that—I just don't want to be that kind of American, but I'm definitely American.

Similar comments were made by other individuals in other groups as well.

Four groups in some way expressed discomfort around race discussions. Several White males expressed discomfort discussing race because of fear of appearing racist. A White male explained,

. . . like I feel like, like in this class, I can't really say what I feel because it could be taken as racism and probably would because I'm from [nearby town stereotyped locally as having issues with racism]. So I think [I] kind of find it hard to talk.

One Black female participant (two Wm, one Bf, one Wf, WF) expressed concern about the idea of discussing race in an all-White classroom:

I'm scared. Oh, my God. I'm scared [laughs]. I mean, I just think, like, I don't know. I think a lot of White people do get the blame. I mean they're seen as the evil oppressors or something. I just think I'd have to be really comfortable. I mean, I'd have to be in a class of all Black people or something.

Powerlessness. One final theme that emerged was a sense of powerlessness or helplessness from participants. Many accepted the existence of White privilege but lacked a sense of how to create change. A White male (two Wm, one Wf, one Bf, WF) explained, "I mean, not to get political, but look at who's in politics. It is White males. I mean something could be done about this, but nothing is being done, because they're just not aware . . ."¹ A White male in another group (two Wm, one Wf, BF) sought specific suggestions: "We've learned a lot about principles and, like, idealized concepts, but not a lot concrete. I mean, I would like to extend the theory. I mean, where do we go from here?"

The discussion of each group proceeded around similar themes although the complexity of the discussions varied greatly—some groups explored all five themes, experienced disagreement and debate, and challenged others' thinking, whereas other groups held short conversations with little disagreement and few emergent themes. The group with all-White students and facilitator (and also the first group to view the film) did not explore the issues of White guilt, cultural consciousness, or a sense of helplessness in the face of dealing with racism. The last group to meet was the only group that did not express some discomfort with the idea of discussing race. Perhaps this is because they had been participating in a course on racial inequality longer than any of the previous groups and had attained a level of comfort earlier groups had not had the opportunity to achieve. As one might expect, the groups with members willing to challenge each other's ideas and/or who had some experience with racism on which to base their conversation seemed to explore topics with more depth than those with a racially homogeneous group membership.

Exit Survey

Results of the exit surveys of groups with a White facilitator versus an African American facilitator were compared. The majority of students in both groups reported the video was very interesting and brought up important issues worthy of discussion. Students reported being equally comfortable speaking during the discussion of the film regardless of the race of the facilitator. In both instances, most of the students reported feeling very comfortable speaking during the discussion with approximately one fourth admitting that although they were nervous at first, they became more comfortable as the discussion continued.

Four of the 14 participants (29%) in the three groups led by the White facilitator reported feeling some discomfort during the discussion for the following reasons: One student reported being uncomfortable speaking freely given the racial make-up of the group, one did not want to appear racist by disagreeing with a comment, one did not want to trigger disagreement within the group, and the last felt he or she had no experience on which to comment. Among the participants whose discussion was guided by an African American facilitator, 3 of the 7 students (43%) reported some discomfort during the conversation. One reported discomfort due to the racial make-up of the group, one did not have an opinion on the topic discussed, and another felt he or she had no experience on which to comment.

After viewing the video and participating in the subsequent conversation, 19 of 21 students reported that race was a "very important" topic for future educators to discuss, and the other 2 participants thought it was an "important" topic. This response was slightly more positive than the entrance survey indicated.

The students generally reported that viewing the video and participating in the discussion were positive experiences. They reported enjoying hearing the views of their classmates, the comfortable intimate setting, and being able to begin to understand diverse viewpoints better. Among discussion groups with African American participants, several people commented on how glad they were that their group had some diversity, and at least one student in an all-White group lamented the lack of diversity in his or her discussion group.

After completing most of the data analysis for this project, the instructor for this course was informally interviewed. She said that she had been showing this film to her classes for about a decade, but it never seemed to have the powerful impact on her students that it did this particular semester. At the end of the course, each student submitted a meta-comment paper summarizing his or her thoughts on the course, and she noticed almost every student commented in some way on this film and the experience of watching and discussing it. The instructor added that her student course evaluations had never been so strong.

Although there is no evidence in which to draw a firm conclusion, she feels as if this film marked a turning point for her class and their understanding of racial inequalities. It is possible that this semester's positive experience was simply coincidental and had nothing to do with this research project, but the instructor hypothesized a couple of possible explanations for the difference. This particular semester, students viewed the film in small groups instead of as a whole class. Students may have watched more attentively or been more comfortable participating in the discussion, which may have enhanced the depth of their understanding. It is also possible that the flexibility of the discussion timing and format had positive role in their experience. She noted that there never seemed enough time to fully discuss the video in class during a regularly scheduled class period.

Discussion

The participants' comments indicate that use of this video provided a strong catalyst for race discussions. The small sample size makes it impossible to draw absolute conclusions regarding how racial diversity influenced the varying conversational experiences of five groups of teacher candidates, although in this instance, the conversations in groups with racial diversity discussed more themes and experienced more disagreement than did the single racially homogeneous group. Based on the discussions and subsequent exit surveys, there is a slight, perhaps premature, indication that the racial make-up of a discussion group could affect the conversations about race in a positive way, and although we cannot say diversity is required to attain understanding of issues of race, it does seem to engage teacher candidates more deeply in the topic as indicated by the length of the conversations, disagreements between candidates, and the number of emergent themes.

Teacher candidates reported slightly more discomfort discussing race when the discussion is led by an African American versus White facilitator, and although it appears that the most engaged groups were the ones who had fellow participants of color involved in the conversation, in this instance, any racial diversity was better than none with regard to teacher candidates' opportunities to have their ideas challenged. This study, although not definitive, reiterates the importance of creating opportunities for teacher candidates to engage with racially diverse populations within a well-rounded teacher education program; however, if this is not feasible, the implementation of strong forms of media contribute to their understanding of diversity.

The numbers of White teacher candidates reporting a lack of cultural awareness or shame of their culture during the film discussion was concerning. This is an area where diversity educators could contribute. Helping candidates recognize the existence of their culture and identify positive elements of White American culture could help reduce White shame and promote greater race consciousness.

Conclusion

Gary R. Howard (2006) discussed how White Americans do not engage in meaningful ways with people of color on any normal basis. This "cultural encapsulation" (Banks, 1994) results in an ignorance of any experience that threatens the mainstream ideals of normalcy. Without these ideas being challenged, White teachers will continue to contribute to the inequities of our society—even with the best of intentions. Although an experience like watching a video and having a discussion afterward is no match for true cultural connections, it does provide an alternative lens for looking at the world and challenging our own ideas about what is "right" and "normal" when there are no other viable alternatives. While rarely is a single experience life changing, incremental changes can occur with intentional, well-designed, and implemented cultural experiences.

The words of some of the participants very powerfully indicate the importance of these experiences. One White female explained,

I just think we truly do not understand what is out there. We always think, well, I'm not racist so it's not my problem . . . and, you see it . . . there were times when I could see something that wasn't right, but I saw it as like their problem. It's not my problem. It's not my responsibility. But it is my responsibility, too. I should get angry about it . . . You just don't really understand it and you don't see it.

A Black male responds to her, "I just think people need to understand that racism is still a problem and not everyone is thinking about it the same way. It is a problem that needs to be worked on."

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1. This discussion was held prior to President Barak Obama entering the presidential race.

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