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What Makes Anti-Racist Pedagogy in Teacher Education Difficult? Three Popular Ideological Assumptions

This article arises from the teaching observations and struggles of two anti-racist educators who co-developed and taught a required cross-cultural education course for predominantly white-identified preservice teachers in a Canadian prairie context. The article identifies three common ideological assumptions about the production of inequality frequently held by these students: race does not matter; everyone has equal opportunity; and through individual acts and good intentions one can secure innocence as well as superiority. These preservice teachers are required to examine the dominant identifications and power relations through which they are produced and unwittingly implicated in reproducing the status quo.

Cet article est né des observations qu'ont faites et des difficultés qu'ont vécues deux enseig-nants luttant contre le racisme. Les enseignants ont collaboré pour développer et enseigner un cours interculturel et obligatoire en pédagogie à des stagiaires, surtout des Blancs, qui étudiaient dans la prairie canadienne. Les auteures identifient trois hypothèses idéologiques communément avancées par ses étudiants sur la production de l'inégalité : la race n'a aucune importance; les chances sont égales pour tous; les gestes que pose un individu et ses bonnes intentions peuvent lui servir de garant d'innocence et de supériorité. Les stagiaires doivent étudier les associations dominantes et les rapports de pouvoir d'où émergent ces stéréotypes et par lesquels ils reproduisent, involontairement, le statu quo.

Introduction

The question of how to teach anti-racist, cross-cultural courses in a teacher education program is an issue many researchers have addressed (Cochran-Smith, 2000; Dipardo & Fehn, 2000; Howard, 1999; Martin, 1995; McIntyre, 1997; Sleeter, 1993; Tatum, 1992). Learners and teachers are not necessarily interested in hearing the difficult things that need to be said or doing the difficult analysis of unpacking their assumptions about inequality. This article draws on our experiences of teaching a required cross-cultural and First Nations course in a teacher education program with students who are predominantly white-identified. Based on our teaching experience, which has been fraught with hope, anguish, and occasionally disbelief, we have identified

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common ideological assumptions that our students hold that make the reception of anti-racist work difficult for them and for those who teach it. The analysis provided in this article arises from our teaching observations and struggles to offer and promote an "anti-oppressive" (Kumashiro, 2000) or "integrative anti-racist" education (Dei, 1995).

Context

We are teachers in preservice teacher education programs at two universities in Western Canada. Verna is a Cree and Metis woman who has taught cross-cultural education and Native studies in teacher education programs since the early 1980s. Verna's recent doctoral research critiques and historicizes the hegemony of the culture concept in Aboriginal education. Carol is a white-identified woman whose experience of more than 20 years includes secondary and university teaching and doctoral research in the production of whiteness. We are both committed to the production of equitable and just social relations in the context of teacher education. Our joint scholarship is evolving from a relationship that began in the late 1980s and that has grown from and is sustained by mutual admiration and respect. This personal history and recognition of our different social positioning forms the foundation for a trusting working relationship that requires ongoing caring, talking, and negotiation.

The differences in our social positioning have been instructive to us and to our students. Our students have also informed us in various ways that social positions are never neutral. Whereas Verna experiences the skepticism that students reserve for "racial minority women teachers" (Bannerji, 1987), students wonder what a white woman such as Carol could possibly know about anti-racist pedagogy. Coming from separate social positions, we do not know the same things; however, we have benefited enormously from each other's perspectives to the extent that we have developed and taught an integrative anti-racist course, which is one form of a required course for all students who wish to graduate with a Bachelor of Teacher Education from the University of Saskatchewan.

Our students are almost exclusively white-identified, mostly lower middle-class Canadian citizens, many from third-generation, non-Anglo immigrant families. Their resistance to the compulsory course is not unusual. As Sleeter (1993), a white educator involved in anti-racist work among white teachers, says, "While I believe whites are educable, I have gained appreciation for the strength of our resistance to change" (p. 168). Students arrive with various understandings and assumptions about what they will encounter in such a course. Most think they are going to learn about *the cultural other* and be informed of strategies for how they will "deal with" the other in the classroom. In this Canadian prairie context, it is Aboriginal peoples who form the greatest critical mass to challenge normative practices of a dominant white culture. *The cultural other* is typically understood to be Aboriginal peoples even though other visible minority groups also make the area their home.

Student resistance to anti-racist teaching comes from a variety of sources. As it is organized as a compulsory part of their education, students perceive the course as an infringement on their liberty even before they enter the class. Their reaction is significant as it is not the only compulsory part of the program. A requirement to learn of the *other* challenges students' self-images as already

knowledgeable and sympathetic to difference. That the course is compulsory is taken by some as an indication of a moral lack on their part, a suggestion that is an affront to their self-perceptions as supportive liberals (Schick, 1998). Alternately, some resist because they do not imagine themselves as teachers of Aboriginal students. They do not plan to accept teaching positions where Aboriginal students are enrolled. A final point of resistance to this anti-racist course is that students are concerned they will be caught out by the shadow of their own racism (Schick, 2000). Bannerji (1987) explains why this anti-racist work is complicated:

> Racism becomes an everyday life and "normal" way of seeing. Its banality and invisibility is such that it is quite likely that there may be entirely "politically correct" white individuals who have a deeply racist perception of the world. It is entirely possible to be critical of racism at the level of ideology, politics and institutions ... *yet possess a great quality of common sense racism.* (p. 11, emphasis added)

The student resistance we have encountered is not unique to Canadian prairie teacher education students. Students enrolled in anti-racist courses such as those described by Tatum (1992) suggest that resistance to critical social and race analysis is common. Martin (1995) explains, "students have learned to deny or ignore the historical patterns and systemic nature of oppression in American society and American schools" (p. 67). Allsup (1995) found that

> Most white students (and definitely most white male students) will recoil at the suggestion that they are members of a dominant group; most reject the suggestion that they are accountable for the benefits of their history that includes oppression in their society; most will express dismay when the opinion and what they consider to be the knowledge they utilize are exposed as the discourse of the oppressor. (p. 92)

Resistance to cross-cultural and anti-racist education manifests itself in many forms, including various combinations of denial of inequality, selective perceptions of reality, guilt and anger, and at times withdrawal from learning (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 1997; Elliot, 1997; Martin, 1995; Sleeter, 1993). By offering data from a rural-based small urban setting where the victims of racism are predominantly Aboriginal, our work adds a new dimension to the existing literature, which generally focuses on large urban settings where the victims of racism are other people of color such as Blacks or Asians.

Through our teaching experiences, we have identified three popular ideological assumptions that work against equitable social relations and the possibilities for social change. These ideological assumptions are pivotal to students' learning as well as our own understanding of the resistance we encounter to anti-racist pedagogy. Each assumption is discussed individually although they work together and depend on one another. Our aim is to analyze common ideological assumptions that reveal particular "commonsense" assumptions about the production of inequality. These commonsense interpretations have been a caution to us in our growing realization that how inequality is defined has every possibility of reinforcing the status quo. We are concerned that anti-racist teaching can unintentionally reinforce relations of domination in educational institutions (McCarthy & Crichlow, 1993) if the teaching fails to examine racist ideologies and the politics of racial identifications.

Theory and Method of Anti-Racist Education

An important theoretical perspective in the course we teach draws on a Foucauldian notion of power relations evident in the discourse and discursive practices that are constitutive and productive of "social subjects, social relations, and systems of knowledge and belief" (Fairclough, 1992, p. 36). In a discussion of a Foucauldian notion of discourse, Fairclough explains that discourses are both political and ideological: "Discourse as a political practice establishes, sustains, and changes power relations" (p. 67); and "Discourse as an ideological practice constitutes, naturalizes, sustains and changes significations of the world from diverse positions in power relations" (p. 67). We introduce students to discourse analysis that invites them to explore their own production as social subjects in a social, economic, and political process and practice in which knowledge/power is germane.

This concern with how ideology helps to naturalize and normalize existing social identities and social relations is not new (Belsey, 1980; Fairclough, 1992; Henriques, Holloway, Urwin, Venn, & Walkerdine, 1984; Weedon, 1997). For example, Weedon examines the processes and practices by which ideology in the form of commonsense knowledge is productive of gender identities, and especially femininity, including such commonsense knowledge and ideas that "children need their mothers" (p. 74). Burr (1995) clarifies that "ideas are not ideological, but it is the uses to which they [ideas] are put that is ideological" (p. 82). In other words, rather than accepting the belief that children need their mothers, one is directed to exploring the social, economic, and political interests that are served by insisting that women are the natural primary caretakers of children.

In this article we present several "commonsense" statements to exemplify the ideological assumptions that support them. The statements we quote are typically heard in resistance to anti-racist education. They are not unique, however, as they are also found in elite discourses such as the media, the law, and parliamentary structures (van Dijk, 1993).

> What this kind of deconstruction asserts is that any given body of statements, whether in everyday conversation or a scientific paper, depends on a number of other bodies of statements, some of which carry deeply entrenched convictions and explanatory schemas fundamental to the dominant form of making sense of the world at any particular period in a culture. (Henriques et al., 1984, p. 104)

In our analysis we understand that broader discursive systems in which utterances are embedded can be read for the ideological assumptions that support the utterances (Wetherell & Potter, 1992). We wonder, what makes these common statements intelligible in this context? What makes these statements sayable?

We begin this process of developing a critical social analysis with an exploration of the interrelatedness of knowledge, power, and the production of social difference. Most students are unprepared for a social and political analysis in which they cannot stand outside and view themselves in a neutral and objective manner. Our course begins with readings that highlight the social and material practices involved in the production of knowledge, providing students with a basis from which they might be open to voices silenced by knowledge or power relations. Students are alerted to the power differential

that determines whose knowledge and what knowledge is considered valuable. We emphasize that power/knowledge is productive of social relations (Banks, 1993; Connell, 1993), as illustrated by the fact that school curricula mainly reflects the point of view of powerful people who organize it.

We offer students a useful, if not simplified, description of power relations as three points joined in what is familiarly referred to in class as the "power triangle." We use the example of women and the work force. Point one refers to the personal level: a woman receives a low wage in a low-status, female-dominated job. Point two refers to systemic relations: women earn roughly 70% of what men earn. Point three refers to the level of ideology: these inequitable employment practices are supported by the "commonsense" notion that women's work is less valuable than men's work. A triangle indicates the interconnections and mutually reinforcing nature of these three points that are admittedly described in a simplified version. In our teaching, rather than view mainly the personal and systemic points, we believe it is important to examine the ideological assumptions that enable and support personal and systemic practices of inequality.

Through a set of readings and much discussion, students explore the production of class, gender, sexuality, disability, and race as intersecting and interlocking identity formations (Anyon, 1994; Carter, 1986, 1996; Gregory, 1996; Ng, 1993; Overall, 1995; Wendell, 1989). The readings demonstrate how dominant identities rely on peripheral, marginalized, stigmatized identities for self-definition, for defining who *we* are because *we* are not *them*. This is described as "dominance through difference" (Fellows & Razack, 1998). In our teaching *difference* is denaturalized through a process of exploring how dominant identifications-such as *able-bodied, middle-class*, and *heterosexual* achieve normative recognition in relation to the construction of outsider identifications such as *disabled, homosexual, working-class*, and *Aboriginal peoples*.

We often begin exploring the production of *difference* with Wendell's (1989) and Gregory's (1996) work on disability. They argue that the identities of people with disabilities are not shaped solely by these people's physical or biological conditions, but also by social contexts that interpret their disabled condition solely as pathological in relation to able-bodied. Another example of the center relying on the margins for definition is found in the construction of Europeans as "civilized" in relation to "uncivilized" Aboriginal people, a distinction based on criteria such as private property, patriarchy, and Christian morality (Carter, 1996; Ng, 1993). This analysis of the production of dominance through difference provides the basis for a historical analysis of racialization, and in particular the production of whiteness.

In the frame of interlocking identities, we focus most significantly on the construction of race privilege in Canada. For the first time many students are aware that they have a racial identity and that it is produced in a specific context of social, historical, and material practices of nation building (Frankenburg, 1996; MacIntosh, 1998; Norquay, 1993; Omi & Winant, 1998). Students examine how dominant histories of Canadian settlement are produced through stories of triumphal whiteness, and how this production is dependent on the silencing of other histories. In this regard it is necessary to challenge the assumption that Canada has always been a fair nation, and we do this by

exploring the counter-histories of racially marginalized groups. The assumption of fairness and the silencing of racialized minority history are foundational moves for keeping intact the ideology of meritocracy.

We consider a variety of counter-histories. We study the efforts of freed African slaves who immigrated as pioneers and settlers to the Canadian prairies and their rejection by white settlers in the region (Shepard, 1991), as well as a history of the efforts by Chinese indentured laborers to participate as equals in the early 20th-century British Columbia labor movement (Creese, 1991). We also read about the efforts of Irish immigrants in the United States as they struggled to gain acceptance as white respectable citizens by repudiating African Americans with whom they had the most in common socially (Roediger, 1991). Students are provided with examples of the instability of racialization, including how *whiteness* is not a fact, but something their ancestors went to considerable effort to achieve. The example of Ukrainian immigration to Canada illustrates the ease and arbitrariness with which ancestors of many of the students were initially racialized, marginalized, and stigmatized (Luhovy, 1994). Students examine the processes and practices by which their ancestors—in adjusting to processes of Anglo colonization—were able to achieve a certain shade of idealized whiteness by Anglicizing their names, religions, and languages. We also examine how members of a contemporary white working-class struggle to maintain firm racial boundaries in spite of holding similar class positions with many brown and black working-class people (Weis, Proweller, & Centrie, 1997).

Throughout the course students engage in cooperative learning strategies that serve to facilitate and encourage them to assume responsibility for understanding and then communicating the content of course readings. Students are directed through the readings by a list of questions that we have developed and given them for each article. Variously, the content of the course is taken up primarily though both small- and large-group discussions. At appropriate intervals in course materials, students are provided an opportunity to synthesize in writing the social and political analysis of inequality that is offered.

In the major course assignment, students write autobiographies in which they are asked to engage in reflective social and political self-analysis. Employing information from their own histories, students are expected to write a reflective and analytical essay—and not a chronological report—that incorporates a minimum of 10 course readings. They are encouraged to comment on their own social production, exploring how their own families achieved and are achieving what is commonly understood as *respectability*. As they come to understand that identifications change with education, place of residence, language spoken, and the Anglicizing of immigrant names, they also see how they are produced as white and how that identification can shift and change. Students are encouraged to comment on what their gender, sexuality, ability, class, and race afford them or cost them and how these identifications depend on the production of normative social practices and histories. Students analyze the basis on which privileges are both denied and assigned and the effects that this has on the reproduction of inequality.

The autobiographical assignment requires that students synthesize what they have learned throughout the course and combine it with reflections on

their own social production. Most welcome the opportunity to gather stories from their families and to analyze their findings in a larger social and cultural context. Students routinely report that in the challenge to think about their social, economic, and historic production, they see that identities are produced through stigmatized and marginalized *others*.

The Challenge of Three Popular Ideological Assumptions

It is important to note that our students have had a variety of reactions to anti-racist education, coming as they do with various social positionings and experiences. In the following section we examine students' remarks in response to the course that is briefly described above. The remarks presented below are not peculiar to preservice white teachers: others who are engaged in anti-oppressive education have found that their students tend to believe that the system is fair and equitable and that through the efforts of one's hard work and talent, one is justly rewarded. For example, Ashton and Webb (1986) found that teachers tended to believe that the "social system works well, is essentially fair, and moves slowly but inevitably toward progress" (p. 30). Osajima (1995) found that students believed structural barriers to equality had been effectively removed and that they lived in a color-blind society based on meritocracy. Osajima also saw that students believe racism is a "problem of attitude, interpersonal relations, and communications. [And that] racial inequalities can be overcome by assimilation and hard work" (p. 133).

The students' remarks, or in other words the discourse we offer as examples, are commonly heard in the social, political, and professional communities of which students are a part. The students' remarks are samples of unexamined "commonsense" notions to which students have access and can take for granted in the repertoire of social commentary. As Goldberg (1990) states, "In a field of discourse like racism, what is generally circulated and exchanged is not simply truth but truth claims or representations. These representations draw their efficacy from traditions, conventions, institutions, and tacit modes of mutual comprehension" (p. 298) that assume commonsense status. To help them past these "commonsense" stopping points, students are invited to examine the ideological assumptions on which these statements are based and on which inequality is justified.

In what follows we have identified three common ideological assumptions that support the students' statements; we discuss these assumptions, drawing primarily on the content and analysis provided by the readings from our course. Although many more issues comprise this complex topic, this article examines how three common assumptions complicate the reception of anti-racist pedagogy.

Ideology Assumption #1: Race doesn't matter (culture does)

These are statements we commonly hear in response to the anti-racist education we offer.

- As far as I'm concerned, we're all part of the same human race and that's all that matters. I don't see the color of the person's skin.
- We all need to appreciate and celebrate our racial differences. We just need to get along.
- How could I be racist? I don't even know any Aboriginal people.

- The problem is that their values and beliefs are so different from ours.

We have found that these statements are reflective of an effort to deny that race matters. When we say, "race matters," we mean that in this society all people have identifications based on the effects of racialization (Goldberg, 1993; Roman, 1993); these effects are discursive practices that produce and are produced by social and political exchanges. In terms of power relations, we are talking about the dominant racial identity of our students, an identity commonly known as white.

> Whiteness refers to a set of locations that are historically, socially, politically, and culturally produced and moreover are intrinsically linked to unfolding relations of domination. Naming "whiteness" displaces it from the unmarked, unnamed status that is itself an effect of its dominance. Among the effects on white people both of race privilege and of the dominance of whiteness are their seeming normativity, their structured invisibility. (Frankenberg, 1993, p. 6)

In an other study, Weis et al. (1997) explain white identity as something that "swirls around the creation and maintenance of the dark 'other' against which their own whiteness and goodness is necessarily understood" (p. 212). For many students an examination of white identity marks the awakening to their own racialization, especially as we move in the course, to examine their own white identity production in the context of specific, historical, and material practices of racialization.

The construction of whiteness is a fundamental concept taught in our course, which although we have not yet explicitly named it, is a necessary concept for everything we have said thus far. For some students the construction and production of whiteness is the most difficult concept. Some avoid it by saying that even naming whiteness is to be racist. We encourage students to question the implications of dominant identifications that in this western Canadian context include being white, middle-class, able-bodied, straight, Christian, English-speaking, and any other identity that is considered normative here and now.

This strategy of denying that race matters supports differences of power reflected in historic, social, political, and economic practices. *Race* is a social and historical category produced through power relations and necessary for the construction of difference—difference that is frequently explained in dominant discourses as "innate inferiority/superiority" (Ng, 1993; Omi & Winant, 1998). This denial of unequal power normalizes and makes invisible both historical and current relations of inequality. Without naming relations of inequality based on *race*, racial inequality is assumed to be an explanation for disadvantage.

We have noticed how reluctant students are to talk about race and racial identities; they would prefer instead to talk about *cultural difference*. This recasting of the discourse suggests that the problem resides with the *other* and her or his culture. Consequently, the emphasis on culture leaves the onus on the *culturally different* to fit in (St. Denis, 2002). The *others* are required to do a better job of explaining themselves, healing themselves, or abandoning their culture. The statement "The problem is that their values and beliefs are so different from ours" suggests that the *others'* cultural values and beliefs—what constitutes *difference*—is the problem. Their culture, however it is conceived—as

dysfunctional, inadequate, or *too much*—is what contributes to and explains their inequality. Larocque (1991), an Aboriginal scholar, writes about this practice:

> There seems to be a need to deny that racism exists. There are many denial mechanisms such as stereotyping, blaming the victim and backlashing.... These policies [assimilation, paternalism, confiscation of lands] have had a devastating impact on Native peoples but the fallout has been explained away as stemming from *cultural differences.* In turn *cultural differences* are reduced to stereotypes such as "Indians can't or won't adjust" to city life. (p. 74)

We tell our students that race matters because without acknowledging that it does, we ignore how racialized identities are always operating to create difference: denial that one has a racial identity trivializes and makes invisible the effects of power (Roman, 1993). By claiming that "we're all part of the same human race" and that the "color of a person's skin" is invisible, students whitewash the daily advantage of white privilege (Henriques et al., 1984; MacIntosh, 1998; Sleeter, 1993). By denying that race matters, whiteness as in the dominant racial identification can be considered the invisible norm against which *others* are judged as "not white/not quite" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 92). As a consequence of this denial, Larocque (1991) discusses how racism is constructed as a problem of mutual dislike.

> Racism is a particular prejudice that legitimizes an unequal relationship. In other words, racism is political; it facilitates and justifies socioeconomic mobility for one group at the expense of another ... While there may be mutual dislike, there is no such thing as a mutual discrimination in an unequal relationship. (p. 75)

Students would prefer to see racism as a minor problem, a result of attitudes and individual prejudices instead of institutional practices and ideological assumptions that support ongoing construction of whiteness as a racially dominant as well as invisible identification (hooks, 1992). Culture talk is popular because it does not challenge the status quo (St. Denis, 2002).

By not acknowledging the power relations and the effects of racialization, a discourse of cultural relativism and how one culture is just as good as the next often prevails. This assumption that race doesn't matter supports the belief that cultural difference explains inequality. Through this assumption, the effects of racialization are considered beyond discussion, and conversations about it are therefore silenced, or at the very least not considered for polite company.

Ideology Assumption #2: Meritocracy—Everyone has equal opportunity
Here are some other statements we commonly hear in response to our anti-racist education.

- I was taught that I could do anything I wanted if I was prepared to make sacrifices.
- If a person expects to be treated with respect, then they will get respect. If they don't expect it, they will not get it.
- People are victims because they choose to be victims.
- My family started with nothing, and we worked hard to get to where we are now. They just want everything given to them.

By meritocracy we mean the assumption that everyone has equal opportunity because we are all basically the same; all that is required to get ahead is hard work, talent, and effort. This is a fundamental promise of capitalism, and

students have thoroughly absorbed this commonsense cultural belief. They believe that Canada is a country of unlimited resources and opportunity, a nation to which immigrants have come to "make something of themselves." Our students firmly believe, as many others also believe, that rewards are assigned to those who have talent and work hard (Banks, 1993; Briskin, 1994). Although one does need effort and talent to achieve one's goals, actual outcomes are in fact mediated in many unacknowledged ways by one's class, gender, race, and other social identifications and positioning. To quote from Briskin (1994):

> The bootstrap message does not recognize the deeply embedded structural, economic, and political barriers that circumscribe [people's] choices. Individual solutions and successes are indeed available, but primarily to those who have some privilege. The degree to which hard work pays off is limited by the constraints of race, class, gender and sexual orientation. (p. 447)

We organize our course to challenge the notion of unfettered meritocracy and its ideology of rugged individualism and self-determination. For example, we read about the resentment and resistance on the part of white settlers to the emerging successful adaptation of First Nations peoples to an agricultural economy (Carter, 1986).

If we think that success is attributed entirely to individual effort, then the lack of success is taken as evidence of characteristics such as laziness, low character, morals, and intelligence (Carter, 1986, 1996; Creese, 1991; Roediger, 1991). This assumption enables students to say, "My family started with nothing, and we worked hard to get to where we are now. They just want everything given to them." If we imagine that we are all self-determining and unencumbered, then disadvantage and poverty are attributed to lack of motivation, effort, and the ability to make the right choices. Stress is placed on psychological strength and individual character traits; failure is merely an effect of not understanding how "we do things."

> Individualism … emphasizes personal power to change oneself and one's circumstances. For this reason, it often ends up disempowering women [and other minorities]. The dictum that all is possible—that every choice is available—is coincident with the view that lack of success is a result of laziness or personal failure. If a woman does not make it, it is because she has not tried hard enough—a thinly disguised version of "blaming the victim." (Briskin, 1994, p. 447)

A further problem with the assumption of meritocracy is that it ignores how dominant group identifications facilitate access to social and institutional power. It ignores that identities are not individually chosen, but depend on the construction of social differences and the meanings applied to departures from normative identities. Meritocracy assumes that power is equally available and distributed, thereby ignoring social, economic, historical, and political conditions. For example, as a young child Norquay (1993) recounts how without an understanding of how racism works, she assumed that all were equally positioned to raise objections to racist practices in the classroom. Claiming an individual rather than a group identity supports the denial and invisibility of privilege and responsibility.

For me white privilege has turned out to be an elusive and fugitive subject. The pressure to avoid it is great, for in facing it I must give up the myth of meritocracy. It these things are true, this is not such a free country; one's life is not what one makes it; many doors open for certain people through no virtues of their own. (MacIntosh, 1998, p. 167)

Ideology Assumption #3: Goodness and innocence—by individual acts and good intentions, one can secure innocence as well as superiority

Finally, here are some further statements we commonly encounter in response to anti-racist education.

- I don't see race. I see people as people instead of judging by external appearance.
- I am fascinated by all the cultures. I love learning about them.
- We weren't like some families. At our house we were taught to respect all cultures.
- Why do they always bring up the past? I wasn't there.

This is perhaps the most challenging of the three ideological assumptions to many white students' sense of self. For those in positions of institutional superiority and advantage, one typically participates by helping others; in turn, helping others is proof of superiority. This is not to say that being identified as white is necessarily a bad thing. But the way whiteness operates as an unspoken norm obscures how it is considered not only normative, but also superior. To be innocent is described by Fellows and Razack (1998):

> To be unmarked or unnamed is also simply to *embody* the norm and not to have actively produced and sustained it. To be the norm, yet to have the norm unnamed, is *to be innocent of the domination of others.* (p. 341, second emphasis added)

Students come to our courses thinking that they are going to learn of the *other*, to learn how they can be helpers, to discover how to incorporate the dominant society's gestures of benevolence toward those designated as *others*. This is the assumption of superiority that whiteness permits: what we have is what the world needs whether it wants it or not. This sense of superiority is connected to what it means to be a respectable citizen and teacher (Fellows & Razack, 1998). Students are surprised to learn that the course is not about the *other*, but about them. This course analysis and critique is difficult for our students; indeed, it would be hard for any white-identified person: that the notion of innocence and goodness depends on the marginalization of the *other*.

> Much of their identity production swirls around the creation and maintenance of the dark "other" against which their own whiteness and goodness is necessarily understood. (Weis et al., 1997, p. 212)

Challenging students to look at the production of their own identifications disabuses them of the notion that they will be the "helpers," interested on-lookers, or those who can appreciate the "exotic other" (hooks, 1992). *The other* is positioned as exotic spectacle that the dominant culture may appreciate and consume: "I am fascinated by all the cultures. I love learning about them."

> Many white people not only do not acknowledge racism as a system of domination, but also choose to do nothing about it if they do. "Having a choice" makes us suspect, because we might pack up anytime the going gets tough. History is

littered with examples of people from the power group taking their ball and going home when they're "misunderstood," when they're accused, when the consequences are distasteful, when people "aren't grateful" for their efforts. (Thomas, 1994, p. 168)

The course analysis redefines how the problem of inequality can be understood and redirects students' attention to what and who needs to change. Students attempt to defend themselves because there is a great deal at stake. For example, maintaining the assumption of one's goodness relies on denying that race matters—even as goodness and innocence simultaneously depend on race mattering. As stated by Goldberg (1993), "Race is irrelevant, but all is race" (p. 6).

This association between dominance and goodness are crystal clear in the following quotation gleaned from research on the effects of anti-racist teaching (Schick, 2000). The student in the research is challenged in his sense of self as innocent and virtuous. He states,

Many students felt that they were being persecuted through the course content because of, you know, simply by virtue of them being white and, you know, there's validity to what they say.... You know, I've often felt myself that why simply by virtue of being male, why do I have to pay retribution? Why do I have to pay for these past injustices (M7911-12)? (p. 92)

This student was incensed because he had come to the conclusion that in this society being white and male are virtues. Now he is asked to consider that he is implicated through his dominant identifications. Countless forms of denial are necessary to maintain oneself as innocent, including the following: countercharges of white male-bashing, and reverse discrimination; dismissing experiences of oppression among target groups; and dismissing the credentials of one who brings bad tidings (shooting the messenger) (Adams et al., 1997; Martin, 1995). All of this assumes that the privileges of whites, males, and dominant identifications are beyond criticism and that unearned virtue will be maintained by silence. If the status quo is to be maintained, these virtues are not debatable points—there are simply no other voices. Goodness and dominant group innocence are maintained as commonsense assumptions that resist examination.

A position of goodness and innocence is held as proof of superiority. The claim of innocence acts as both cause and effect: one is produced through innocence as superior; and superiority is claimed as a sign of one's innocence. Only conscious and deliberate actions that everyone would denounce as discriminatory are owned as that for which one can be held responsible. This allows students to say, "We weren't like some families. At our house we were taught to respect all cultures."

Conclusion

The statements identified in this article are examples of common discourses that reflect ideological assumptions. For example, when students say "We just need to get along," they deny the power of racial identity to confer privilege. They do not acknowledge that people are differently positioned in hierarchical structures that depend on social and political difference. Unmarked dominance remains invisible, and inequality is explained as a product of cultural dif-

ference. The idea that opportunity is equally open to all, and that students can do anything they want as long as they are "prepared to make sacrifices," ignores and trivializes the significance of unearned privileges conferred by their own dominant group identity. This "commonsense" notion implies that success follows from one's individual effort and, by employing blaming-the-victim logic, suggests that discrimination and disadvantage are one's own fault. Students are often unaware of, or choose to forget, how disadvantage has been constructed historically. That they continue to benefit from historical practices of discrimination allows claims of innocence. That is why they can say with impunity, "Why do they always bring up the past? I wasn't there."

These are difficult concepts that we teach. Students' difficulties are not reflections only of their inability or reluctance to engage with the imminent critique offered by the course. The concepts and ideological assumptions that we describe are embedded in the social fabric of our schools, communities, and the history of our nation; they are not unique to our preservice teachers. Furthermore, students find it helpful to hear that these three ideological assumptions are linked and depend on each other. A belief in meritocracy that depends on individual and not group identity encourages denial of both racial significance and the systematic advantages of dominant groups. Furthermore, this individualism enables one to plead one's innocence of individual acts of racism.

We discuss the coming to race consciousness of white education students and why this process is difficult for both those who learn and those who teach. We acknowledge that a great deal is at risk for students' self-perceptions in that the course challenges explanatory frameworks and commonsense ideological assumptions that students hold dear and that serve them well. The task of addressing racism in our society would not be so difficult if it were only a matter of providing more information, doing multiculturalism more effectively, or the simple adjustment of students' attitudes. Instead, we need to look at the discursive practices of individuals and institutions as well as at the ideological assumptions that underwrite these practices. Both institutional and individual change must occur, including the more widespread teaching of a critical anti-oppressive education that examines the co-production of dominant and subordinate relations. By requiring our students to examine their dominant identifications and the power relations through which they are produced, we see students engage in a difficult but necessary process in challenging the assumptions that normalize and naturalize inequality.

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