

# Approaches to Diversity Education: A Critical Assessment

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*The idea that differences in race, gender, religion, sexuality, age, or other categories deemed unworthy of group inclusion shouldn't matter when it comes to people's access to all that a society has to offer, is central to the teaching of diversity. Diversity courses can be powerful vehicles, not only for teaching students about social change and reclaiming the principles of past and present civil rights leaders, but also for refuting the notion that we already live in a largely egalitarian society. This paper examines what a small sample of diversity texts employ with respect to key concepts and definitions. It also makes recommendations for changes and tools to help move the discussion from diversity and tolerance to inclusion and social justice. Lastly, it argues that there is need for specific training for faculty who teach about diversity in order for them to be prepared for some of the critical questions they will be asked by their students.*

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One of the basic missions of Sociology is to understand diversity and explain its impacts, both positive and negative, on the world in which our students live. The American Sociological Association's Task Force on the Undergraduate Major makes this clear in recommending that all Sociology curricula should "...underscore the centrality of race, class and gender in society and in sociological analysis" (McKinney et al. 2004:18). That same report calls for students to be exposed to content that is "...multicultural, cross-national, and cross-cultural" (McKinney et al. 2004:19). Thus, teaching about diversity is simply at the core of the discipline.

Teaching about diversity, however, is not without challenges, both for the teacher and for the students. The teacher, often depending on the type of institution, may be faced with either a class full of highly homogeneous students or highly diverse ones. These extremes of composition may require the teacher to be aware of widely different teaching/learning styles. Similarly, all students come to each class with

unique experiences and perspectives on the world. The teacher needs to become familiar with the students' perspectives to respond critically to their positions.

In the following sections, we briefly review the notion of critical pedagogy, then present a synopsis of our analysis of a set of diversity textbooks, focusing on concepts that we believe are essential—white identity and privilege, color-blindness, and the nature of the definitions that are employed. This is followed by recommendations that we believe can improve the teaching of cultural diversity.

## One Purpose of Diversity Education—Critical Pedagogy

Freire's early statement of critical pedagogy appeared in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970). Since then, several authors have built on his philosophical foundation (Postman and Weingartner 1971; Shor 1987; Mayo 1999). For example, Giroux (1988) argued there was a shift in the 1980s that was part of the conservative agenda, and involved a movement away from issues of equity and justice to a focus on

conservative values. He further contended that there was little concern with how public education would prepare students to understand the sociopolitical forces that influence their futures.

In the recent edition of his classic, Freire (2000) states clearly, “There is no neutral education. Education is either for domestication or for freedom” (p.vi). Following in that tradition, but to a sociological audience, Howard (2010) asserted that teaching is not a neutral act. Rather, teaching is highly political, and teacher actions can contribute to or hinder the development of student identities. It is not unreasonable to further assert that a liberal education should have a primary goal of assisting students to develop their critical thinking skills and independent worldviews (Bourdieu 1973; Reynolds 2011; Watanabe-Crockett 2015). Thus, from a critical pedagogy standpoint, education is in part about encouraging students to embrace change, and in part about challenging the dominating elements of society (Shor 1987; Giroux 1988; hooks 1994). This strategy focuses on helping students embrace critical thinking, and assisting them in the development of the skills necessary to evaluate the varied perspectives that exist on any issue they will encounter.

When a teacher adopts a critical pedagogy approach, students are more likely to gain respect not only for their own knowledge and experience, but for the knowledge and experience of others. The assertion is that students learn most when they are an active part of the learning process. Similarly, teachers must also view the student’s knowledge as a viable and an important part of their educational development. Unlike Socrates, who expected his students to use questioning to arrive at what he thought was the right answer, teachers embracing critical pedagogy understand there are multiple answers to most issues.

Moreover, they recognize that an important part of education is the recognition of the value of the students’ interpretational journeys. While we do not think a critical pedagogical approach in its purest form is currently practical (e.g., Freire 2000), there are elements of critical pedagogy that can and should be incorporated into the classroom.

One of the important elements of critical pedagogy relevant to any class, especially one centered on diversity, is the textbook and/or other reading materials the teacher chooses for his/her students. How the teacher makes that decision and what criteria s/he employs can help determine the effectiveness of the course and the learning that takes place within it. In that context, the Department of Sociology was tasked with revising an introductory-level course on cultural diversity so it would match the needs of a new general education curriculum. We were faced



with selecting a textbook that met the desired content of the course, yet also provided the students with the multiple perspectives that are required for critical thinking and analysis.

### **Choosing a Textbook for Cultural Diversity**

The text to be selected would be used in all sections of the cultural diversity course (routinely eighteen per semester, with class sizes

from 25-35). The basic content requirement was for the text to cover at the very least the topics of race, class, gender, and sexuality. The department also thought it was critical that the text contain ample current, real world examples. Other considerations were cost, publication date, and student support materials. To inform our selection, we looked at how each text presented the key concepts and definitions we felt were important in teaching students about cultural diversity: white identity and privilege, color-blindness, biological definitions and stereotypes. We began by ordering books from publishers that might apply. When they arrived one of the three members of the department reviewed it to determine if the content was minimally acceptable. We eliminated the texts that did not cover the minimum required topics, and focused only on the following ten texts:

- Bakanic 2009: *Prejudice: Attitudes About Race, Class, and Gender*  
 Feagin and Feagin 2012: *Racial and Ethnic Relations, Census Update*  
 Healey and O'Brien 2014: *Race, Ethnicity, Gender, and Class: The Sociology of Group Conflict and Change*  
 Healey 2014: *Diversity and Society: Race, Ethnicity, and Gender*  
 Marger 2011: *Race and Ethnic Relations: American and Global Perspectives*  
 McLemore and Romo 2005: *Racial and Ethnic Relations in America*  
 Meer 2013: *Key Concepts in Race and Ethnicity*  
 Parrillo 2014: *Strangers to These Shores*  
 Schaefer 2014: *Race and Ethnic Groups*  
 Scupin 2012: *Race and Ethnicity: The United States and the World*

### **White Identity and Privilege**

Two related key concepts we believe critical to the discussion of racial diversity are white identity and privilege. We contend that it is simply impossible for students to understand

racial and other forms of diversity and their impact in the United States without engaging these key concepts. Questions with which students often struggle include: when did the concept of white become important; what does middle class mean; and is there such a thing as gay culture?

Within the texts reviewed, Healey and O'Brien (2014) addressed white identity only once. They defined it as "a racial privilege that is largely invisible to whites because, unlike minority group members, they don't have to deal with its restrictions. Our racist cultural traditions make whiteness normal, the standard against which others are contrasted and differentiated" (p. 25). Parrillo (2014) addressed white identity indirectly, but did not formally cover it. He did, however, briefly note how Senator Dillingham, in the congressional commission hearings on immigration between 1907 and 1911, used the same arguments that are being used today in regards to recent immigrants (Parrillo 2014). Some of the other texts did address elements of white identity, but only with a paragraph or two (Bakanic 2009; Marger 2011; Schaefer 2014), while other texts (Healey and O'Brien 2014; Parrillo 2014) did provide a few basic examples of white privilege. Overall, however, little space was dedicated to the concept of white identity, especially in Feagin and Feagin (2012), Healey (2014), McLemore and Romo (2005), Meer (2013), and Scupin (2012).

Focusing first on race, many white students find it difficult to understand the notion of white privilege, and a paragraph or two are simply not enough to deal with the nuances of such a key concept (Healey and O'Brien 2014; Healey 2014; Parrillo 2014; Schaefer 2014; and Scupin 2012). White male students in particular often grapple with the fact that they have never been consciously concerned about their skin color or their gender when interacting with others. Moreover, they often do not understand how this might be a problem for those students who are not white or male. However, when students are able to recognize such examples of privilege, and

they are asked to review their own lives to identify times when privilege may have benefited them (or at the very least did not hinder them), it is then that they truly begin to understand privilege (Harlow 2009).

Of course, the notion of privilege can easily be expanded to gender, class, sexuality, age, physical condition, or to any of the intersections of those characteristics. Nevertheless, none of the texts reviewed developed the concept of privilege, and none had a section that tried to explain how impactful privilege or intersectionality is on the full range of current social inequalities. The focus typically was either on class or race. However, even in those contexts, students often react to a discussion of privilege by saying things such as, “How can I be privileged—my family is poor?” “My family doesn’t own a nice home, I don’t feel privileged” “My family wasn’t part of slavery” or “I don’t hate anyone” (Bonilla-Silva and Foreman 2000). Many college-level students simply do not understand how privileged they are, especially given the fact that a majority of Americans do not have college degrees (Ryan and Bauman 2016).

Dealing with the concept of privilege also involves helping the students understand that it is easier to navigate through life when one or more aspect of one’s identity (e.g., one’s skin color or sex or physical condition—or combination) is not in question. A teacher can ask those white students who are struggling with the concept of white privilege, “Do you ever go to the mall and worry if the staff are going to follow you, because you are white?” or “Do you worry about being pulled over by a police officer?” While Gandbhir and Foster’s (2015) discussion of the need for every black family to have a conversation with their sons and daughters on how to act around the police is not surprising to the students of color, white students are often shocked. They do not realize that for persons of color, regardless of how educated, law abiding, or wealthy they are, the police are often to be feared and not trusted.

The same approach applies to privilege based on sex, gender, physical condition, or sexuality.

For women, it may be “Can you walk alone at night, or go to a party, without worrying about being assaulted?” For students who use wheelchairs, it may be “Is there a ramp into the building, or an elevator?” It may even be “Which restroom can I use?” When students start to wrestle with such perspectives, they begin to understand that many of them have managed to avoid barriers that others must routinely face. Moreover, they begin to comprehend that while they may not be directly oppressing others, and might even be strongly in favor of equality, if they do nothing, they effectively support structural and institutional discrimination. They realize that ignoring privilege, and thus inequality, ultimately allows inequality to continue.

### **Color-blindness**

Another key concept, which generalizes from race to other characteristics, is color-blindness. In reference to race, Bonilla-Silva (2006) identifies four central frames of color-blind racism: 1) abstract liberalism, 2) naturalization, 3) cultural racism, and 4) minimization of racism. Abstract liberalism is the Jeffersonian idea of simple meritocracy—without the critical analysis of the fact that white males usually are the ones on the top. Naturalization is the belief that whatever bad or good things happen, it was simply natural, and thus, the way things are and should be. Cultural racism is the belief that while biology may no longer explain racial inequalities, culture still does. Therefore, it is not race per se (or sex or sexuality or physical condition) that holds back an individual or a group’s success. Instead, it is their cultural practices that are responsible. Finally, minimization of racism occurs when individuals suggest that things are better than they were in the past (which in fact is the case—and which makes this approach even more difficult to confront).

When asked about color blindness, majority and/or male students often point to their own successes, anecdotal evidence, and so-called



“model minorities” (e.g., Colin Powell or Barack Obama) and use it as “evidence” that discrimination and inequality no longer exist. Regardless of the rationale used, however, this kind of color-blindness helps to preserve attitudes that deny negative experiences, reject cultural heritage, and invalidate unique perspectives. Indeed, color-blind racists claim not to see race or experience racial inequalities, even when presented with convincing data to the contrary (Cabrera 2014). The same logic applies equally well to sex, or other inequalities. Most of the texts (Parrillo 2014; Bakanic 2009; Feagin and Feagin 2012; Marger 2011; McLemore and Romo 2005; Schaefer 2014) do not include colorblindness beyond a brief mention. There were a few texts that did include colorblind racism (e.g., Healey and O’Brien 2014; Scupin 2012), but those typically spend little space discussing its implications.

As we reviewed the texts, this raised the question: without including material that addresses a particular problem, how can a text expect students to comprehend that such a problem exists? For example, it is clear that the contributions of females and minorities (let alone, minority females) are under-represented in high school history textbooks (Bradburn 2015). Furthermore, no state requires history teacher candidates to have a major or minor in history to teach history (Wong 2015). If high school textbooks are inaccurate, and the history teachers did not get trained in history, then it is reasonable to be concerned about what the students have been taught incorrectly, or perhaps not taught at all. This is what Bonilla-Silva and Forman (2000) contends moves toward the rewriting of history. Our position is that any textbook tackling race, class, sex, or gender relations in the United States needs both historical and current facts as well as documented examples of systemic attempts to ignore history, by misrepresenting the facts or rewriting history. That way, students can read first-hand that social inequality is still a current and predominant issue in American society.

### **Biological Definitions and Stereotypes**

Most of the texts reviewed still reflect a biological approach in their definition of the core concept of race (Bakanic 2009; Feagin and Feagin 2012; Healey and O’Brien 2014; Marger 2011; McLemore and Romo 2005; Parrillo 2014; Schaefer 2014; Scupin 2012). While they are all explicitly critical of biological and genetic definitions of race, they do not frame these definitions as either outdated or incorrect. For example, Parrillo (2014) defines race as “a categorization in which people sharing visible biological characteristics regard themselves or are regarded by others as a single group on that basis” (p. 10). He further states: “...racism is the linking of biological conditions with alleged abilities and behaviors to assert the superiority of one race” (Parrillo 2014:10). While this kind of definition is certainly part of the story, it is oversimplified, and can easily mislead students to focus on biology. We feel any definition of race should include cultural and social construction concepts, as well as a socio-historical discussion of pseudo-scientific definitions.

Even the cultural view of race can be discussed in biological terms. The misguided notion that cultures are absolute, unchangeable, and define the individual is nothing new and should be avoided. One of the common arguments is that physical characteristics like skin color and cranial profile depend on geography, nutrition, and custom (Junker 1998). In contrast, many genetic researchers argue that there is simply no correlation between race and genetics (Lee, Mountain, and Koenig 2001; Wood 2001; Burchard et al. 2003; Olson 2001). Even those that think there is a connection (Schwartz 2001; Mountain and Risch 2004), contend that studying the genetic variances of race primarily makes sense only in terms of looking for cures for diseases. According to Schwartz (2001), there is simply no scientific support for the notion that human populations are discrete, non-overlapping entities.

Some of the textbooks (Schaefer 2014; Healey and O'Brien 2015; Feagin and Feagin 2012, Parrillo 2014) do discuss certain cultural stereotypes and how they are socially constructed as negative when they are framed in the context of a minority group (e.g., being frugal and Jewish). At the same time, they are considered hallmarks of maturity and success when viewed through the lens of white identity. However, all of the texts need more developed analyses of stereotypes. Unfortunately, Hetley and Eberhardt (2014) warn that asking whites to grapple with racial disparities in the criminal justice system may actually prompt people to support the very policies that produce those disparities. One contrasting approach is to present mass incarceration rates with the numbers for whites exchanged with those for blacks. Then, when the students are dispersed into small groups, give them the real data and ask them to analyze it and discover that the numbers were in fact flipped. This tends to produce student responses that are far different from those reported by Hetley and Eberhardt (2014).

### **Recommendations for Change**

There are several changes that would increase the support cultural diversity texts would provide a teacher. One is purely structural. Whether intentional or not, all the texts reviewed followed the “group of the week” approach. As a rule, they are all organized into a series of separate chapters on individual groups—that is, American Indians, Asian Americans, Black Americans, Hispanic Americans, women, LGBTQ, and the elderly. None of them deal with any of the intersectionality that exists. Moreover, not only do all the texts divide the chapters similarly, they spend little time deconstructing the problems that exist with these broad categories. For example, none of the texts have any discussion of how frequently people from Northern African nations such as Egypt and Libya are identified as white, or what it means to be of African descent in places like Puerto Rico, Brazil, Haiti, and the

Bahamas. In addition to intersectionality, we believe that future authors must deal with the impossibility that such broad groups as African (or Hispanic or Asian) are monolithic in nature.

We also encourage textbook publishers to include discussion exercises where students debate some of the differences among various groups. For example, why do many more whites than blacks believe greater progress has been made toward racial equality (Norton and Sommers 2011)? Discussing comparative incarceration rates between the United States and other industrialized nations is another approach. This could be followed by discussing inequalities in U.S. incarceration rates (Schlesinger 2007; Stolzenberg, D'Alessio, and Eitle 2013; Sutton 2013; Kutateladze et al. 2014). These kinds of approaches would help students ground what are otherwise abstract concepts.

One way to challenge the notion that inequality, prejudice, and oppression are all part of the natural order of things is to provide students with information on some of the social changes that indeed have occurred. Vala and Costa-Lopes (2010) argue that courses on diversity should focus on openness and change. They contend that most of the strategies considered in the literature targeting prejudiced attitudes spend too little time on change. Similarly, Moulder (1997) found “little systematic inquiry into the dynamics of struggle between dominant and subordinate groups, and the causes of subordinate group success or failure” (p. iv). Indeed, Moulder (1997) puts much of the responsibility for advocating change squarely on academia. For him, despite affirmative action and mission statements endorsing diversity, academic institutions have a largely white teaching staff, which does not reflect the growing diversity of the student population in the United States.

Of the ten texts reviewed, few confronted social change directly, and none presented a detailed example of how changes have taken place. We believe it is necessary for students to see how change occurs—the steps in the process,

the difficulty, the time involved, and the sacrifices people make. Indeed, many students appear to believe nothing can change; that certain behaviors are “natural” and can’t be modified. We suspect that much of this kind of thinking is because they have not been exposed to examples of successful struggles. All the texts reviewed did include brief examples, but students would benefit from material dedicated to at least one of the recent egalitarian social movements (e.g., race, sexuality). This could detail the origins of the movement, the many people involved, the challenges, the organization needed, and the various aspects of how the group(s) involved were able to elicit change in attitudes, and eventually create laws and modify public behavior. Whatever the movement, students need to understand that things can and do change, how long it generally takes for those changes to occur, and how important it is for people to donate their time, money, and energy to see those movements through.

We also agree with Lowry (2016) that students can be active participants in fighting against oppression. We do not ask them to give up their own privilege. Instead, we ask them to demand a society where all the occupants have the same privilege. That is what “colorblind” is supposed to be but seldom is. Part of the path to action is to recognize that the inequalities which currently exist are still in large part caused by the systemic and institutional bias that persists (e.g., sexism and racism). Therefore, when people argue that blacks, or women, or others, have it bad because they are culturally or otherwise inferior, the students will understand that this kind of “blaming the victim” is often a tool used to continue inequality.

Henderson-King and Kaleta (2000) concluded that in the absence of courses that address social diversity, undergraduate students become less tolerant of others, even over a single semester. Consequently, teachers of diversity courses must also have the skills and knowledge to discuss these issues (DeCesare 2003; Howard 2011). Teachers should be able to provide examples of

how things have changed and offer suggestions on how things can continue to change. Although students may not realize it, circumstances are better for many groups than they were in the 1960s; certainly better than they were in the 1860s. Still, that does not mean society cannot continue to change for the better.

### **Proper Pedagogical Training**

One of the things that would help colleges and universities that offer cultural diversity courses is to make sure their faculty are properly trained, not only in the subject matter but also in the skills of critical pedagogy. Looking just at Sociology, a majority of the top ranked graduate programs do require some form of proseminar (which may or may not include material on teaching), and some form of teaching experience. Some do have a course for graduate student teachers, and some even offer a teaching course that covers pedagogical skills and practice. However, the vast majority of graduate programs either do not require or do not offer additional pedagogical courses. Pescosolido and Milkie (1995) concluded that most of the training for teaching was informal and done individually, despite the evidence for the effectiveness of formal teacher training programs.

Similarly, Paino et al. (2012) contend that few studies appear to test the reliability of teaching methods or strategies taught in different contexts. If one performs a cursory check on PhD-granting programs across disciplines, few programs of any discipline require graduate students to take courses directly related to the actual practice of teaching. Certainly, communication skills and management techniques focusing on how to deal with angry, frustrated, or challenging students would be highly useful. Moreover, one can easily argue that teachers of undergraduate diversity courses are far more likely to run into contentious situations. If a course dealing with issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality is part of the required general education curriculum, and students feel like they have few or no choices, it is especially

critical that teachers are trained in dealing with confrontation and challenges. According to Chang (2002), any course focused on diversity related issues requires a significant investment in faculty development to succeed. However, when the investment is made, the general education curricula can play a meaningful role in improving our society's social dynamics.

## Conclusion

A search for a cultural diversity text made it apparent there was only a relatively small pool of offerings that covered the minimum topics of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Moreover, upon review, it seemed that many of those texts could use updating. Suggestions include: 1) more examples of recent research; 2) altering the presentation of concepts; 3) inclusion of historical and global comparative analyses; 4) a terminology overhaul; and 5) elimination of the "group of the week" format. Such modifications should not only help students critically understand the social world in which they live, but also locate diversity in a comparative approach that incorporates struggles from historical, global, and philosophical perspectives. They would, in turn, also increase the likelihood that students will more accurately perceive the social changes that have taken place as well as those that still remain to be confronted.

Many colleges and universities require students to take courses designed to address issues of diversity. There is clear need for courses that shed the old frameworks and embrace the full range of diversity, including the intersectionalities among statuses, while at the same time aggressively deconstruct such notions as colorblindness and cultural inferiority. Such courses could also help prevent a reactionary social movement that could damage the substantial progress that has been made in race, class, and gender relations in recent decades. Finally, incorporating rigorous critical pedagogical training in more graduate programs is clearly called for, especially if new faculty are

going to be able to respond to tough, and at times reactionary, responses from their students and convert them into useful teachable moments.

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