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Constructing a Deconstruction: Reflections on Dismantling Racism

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Abstract: The article is a reflective narrative regarding the work I do as an ally for change and social justice as a white woman. In my class on Human Diversity and Social Justice, I often discuss how I can use my white privilege to advance social justice to address racism. Several students who have taken the class offer their own reflections on taking the class. Relevant information from the literature is provided to ground the discussion and includes cultural competence, racism, white privilege, and racial identity development. Strategies for deconstructing racism are discussed.

Keywords: Racism; Human Diversity; Cultural Competence; Social Justice

Constructing a Deconstruction: Reflections on Dismantling Racism

When I dare to be powerful,
to use my strength in the service of my vision,
then it becomes less and less important whether I am afraid.

Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (1984)

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to discuss my experience of racism grounded in current literature: what I understand from the literature, how I address it as a person of white privilege, and some reactions from students who have taken my course. Part of my reflection includes information on the discourse of racism and privilege. For those working towards social justice, and social workers in particular, a cognitive approach to the material must also include a process of self-awareness and reflection. As there cannot be a separation of mind, body, and spirit, so there cannot be a separation of content, process, and reaction. It is part of the integration process. I am still a work in progress, critically evaluating the discourse on race and racism, modifying my stance and pedagogy for raising awareness and igniting a passion in my students to work towards change and social justice.

A Note about Language

The language we use has meaning and develops over time within a sociocultural, historical, and political context and is a social practice (Laman, Jewett, Jennings, Wilson, & Souto-Manning, 2012). In other words, the language and words we use matter; language is important. Through my experience, I have come to use the term "black" and "African American" differently. "African American" is more specific and refers to black racial groups descended from Africa who consider themselves "American." "Black" is meant to be inclusive of all black racial groups regardless of citizenship or ethnic background. This might include someone who is Haitian of African descent but does not consider themselves American. The purpose for using this language is to respect how a person identifies themselves in terms of race. I also use the terms Hispanic and Latino interchangeably, but tend to prefer the term Latino, simply because "Hispanic" tends to have more negative stereotypes attached to it than Latino.

Both terms refer to a person of Spanish culture or origin regardless of race including Mexico, Puerto Rico, Cuba, South or Central America. I am also very aware and have become sensitized to the term "American" as it is used to represent a citizen of the United States as if this is the only America. The term "American" implies the United States only and does not actually encompass all of the Americas: Mexico, Central America, South America, and Canada. Therefore, I use U.S. Citizen instead of American. Although I use both Native American and American Indian, I think the term "First Nations persons" better reflects the indigenous peoples of the Americas, but I use all three.

I am hoping that the reader focuses more on the content presented rather than the specific terminology recognizing that I am sensitive to the importance and impact of language. (Language can also be a distraction from the intent being communicated in the writing.)

My Charge

Dismantling racism starts with me. I am a white female, raised in a predominantly white, middle- to upper-middle class area of Michigan, and have chosen to live in a diverse community in Connecticut. In my high school of about 1,500 students, there were only four African American or black students. I was friends with one of these students and could never really understand the racial stereotyping or prejudice that occurred. My parents raised me to be open, respectful, and kind to others. Regardless, I have learned that I too hold stereotypes based upon my socialization in my white world of privilege. I have experienced white guilt, and still do periodically, but less so as I continue to be an ally. However, based upon the values of my family and those I have developed through my life experiences especially as a social worker, the answer to this is to take action. Make a change. Do something about it!

When I first began to teach in social work education, I taught a course on social justice in a graduate social work program and I had no idea that I would develop such an earnest need to know more and to better understand oppression. I was curious to know if this would impact the students in the same way. I conducted a small pretest- posttest pilot study on my class of students and to examine how the content impacted their social attitudes. I found that indeed the students were more likely to develop positive social attitudes from beginning to the end of the course. I was able to continue this study on five sections of the course showing similar findings (Cross-Denny & Heyman, 2011).

At the suggestion of the dean at the time, I participated in the two and a half day Anti-Racism Workshop conducted by the People's Institute (People's Institute for Survival and Beyond, 2006) . This really helped me to develop a better informed understanding of the dynamics of racism in the U.S. from a structural perspective. But, probably most importantly was the opportunity to reflect on my internal processes: how I was socialized; the meaning of my own experiences; and how I fit into the schema of the problem and the possible solutions.

I believe that this change process and developing the awareness needed occurs in "many small steps." It is chiseling away at the multiplicity of complex factors that create the problem of racism in the U.S. Eventually, at a different university, I was able to develop the diversity course into an honors section and then a cross-listing as a core requirement to allow the potential for any student to take the course. Originally, the course was titled "Cultural Competency" but with the assistance of the students in the honors section, it was renamed to "Human Diversity and Social Justice." This name more accurately reflects the content and that understanding diversity combined with taking action requires more than cultural competence. My goal would be to have every student take the course, not only due to my belief that they should, but as a result of suggestions by the students themselves. Even if not every student could take the course, it is possible that most students could be reached based upon the potential ripple effect of a small group that can spread the word and ideas. Ideas and knowledge are contagious.

Multicultural and Cultural Competence

The goals of multicultural social work education are to better understand cultural information, develop cultural sensitivity and competence, and to seek anti-oppressive, critical multiculturalism (Nadan & Ben-Ari, 2013). Multicultural competence includes sensitivity and knowledge of issues experienced by marginalized and oppressed groups and include but are not limited to race, ethnicity, culture, age, gender, disability, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation and religion (Chae, Foley, & Chae, 2006; Nadan & Ben-Ari, 2013). Many professional organizations have instituted formal legal and ethical guidelines for practice in regards to multicultural competence which include the American Psychological Association (2010), the American Counseling Association (2014), and the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) (1996). NASW dictates in its Code of Ethics that social workers must seek to address injustices and "treat each person in a caring and respectful fashion, mindful of *individual differences and cultural and ethnic diversity* [italics added]" (National Association of Social Workers, 1996). NASW is currently in the process of drafting a revised edition of *Indicators for the Achievement of the NASW Standards for Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice* (National Association of Social Workers, 2007). The revised edition continues to emphasize that culture is beyond race and ethnicity and includes other social categories

as indicated in the Code of Ethics. The revised standards will include other emerging concepts with regards to cultural competence including cultural humility, intersectionality, and linguistic competence (National Association of Social Workers, 2015).

Competence is achieved through not only undergraduate or graduate social work education, but also continuing education and many jurisdictions require a certain number of hours in cultural competency to maintain licensure or certification. Practitioners are ethically responsible for treating the diversity of their clientele with sensitivity regarding the cultural aspects which influences the lives of their clients (Chae et al., 2006; Murphy, Park, & Lonsdale, 2006). Professionals need to be continuously learning about different cultures and social categories of diversity, becoming aware of their own biases, stereotypes and prejudgments and how this might impact effective and ethical practice (Tomlinson-Clarke, 2000).

Cultural competency is not only crucial for social work practice but can also present challenges. One can never be truly *culturally competent* as it is impossible to know all cultures or all diverse social categories; the term itself is a misnomer. However, this does not mean that we cannot become as culturally competent as possible. It is an ongoing and dynamic process and represents emerging knowledge and trends such as the more recent inclusion in diversity education of the influence of power structures and the impact of oppression and privilege (Cushman, Delva, Franks, Jimenez-Bautista, Moon-Howard, Glover et al., 2015). Scholars have noted that knowledge, skills, and self-reflection limits true culturally competent practice by not including an experiential component (Saunders, Haskins, & Vasquez, 2015). The use of experiential exercises can assist in a deeper integration in development and growth in multicultural. Learning opportunities may consist of study abroad and cultural immersion programs.

Cultural competency training can present challenges to both participants and facilitators (Cushman et al., 2015). Group members may be at different stages of their racial identity development and may present a wide range of feelings and reactions. The facilitator needs to be able to establish and maintain a safe place for students to share, disclose, and discuss these sensitive topics. They need to manage discussion in terms of when to further pursue or expand on a point and when to leave it alone. International students or those from different cultural backgrounds may have discomfort with the classroom setup and self-disclosure. On the other hand, they may present different viewpoints due to their backgrounds bringing new perspectives to the conversation.

Racism and White Privilege

Racism is a highly charged subject and dialogue seems to be one of the more effective ways to address it and has been instituted into anti-racist training. Yet, it is often this dialogue that is avoided due to the discomfort and denial of a pervasive and painful problem (Adams et al., 2010; Bolgatz, 2005; Tatum, 1997). There are numerous ways in which the dynamics of racism continues to persist. Some actively dismiss the notion of a continuing problem with race in the U.S. Some are silent which perpetuates racism by inaction. For whites, there is an invisible privilege for which only they have access. These actions (or inactions) serve to minimize and perpetuate racism. Being able to discuss racism, though difficult, is the first step in a move to confront, unlearn and "undo" it (Adams et al., 2010; Bolgatz, 2005; Tatum, 1997). Anti-racist education uses the framework that racism is a learned behavior which incorporates the social construction of race and then works towards dismantling it. It entails a methodological look at how racism has been incorporated into all aspects of our culture, through institutions, economics and has historical contexts of inequality (Morelli & Spencer, 2000).

Because language and terms are important, I have included current discourse on the definition of racism. Several definitions of racism are given in the literature. The People's Institute among others uses "Racism Equals Prejudice plus Power" (often referred to as R=P+P) describing it as a system of power and control which continues long after the actual racist attitudes and behaviors have been exhibited by the individual (Hoyt, 2012; Santas, 2000) . It is a complex evolution of power which moves beyond the overt expression of racism. Tatum (1997) uses Wellman's definition that it is "a system of advantage based on race." Tatum also discusses how prejudice and racism are often used interchangeably. She makes a distinction between

them using Wellman's (1977) discussion that the term "prejudice" limits seeing the persistence of racism. It is not just overt discrimination but operates at a very underlying, covert level where white people benefit by their race. Hoyt (2012) astutely argues that the definition of racism can become challenging when it is discussed in terms of who can or cannot be racist. He incorporates oppression and expands the term to "race-based oppression." To be prejudiced, one must possess pre-conceived ideas or opinions. However, to oppress, one must have the power.

White privilege is often discussed in tandem with racism and can become a barrier for whites in addressing it and having open and honest discussions about it (Miller et al., 2004). McIntosh's infamous article of "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack" (Rothenberg, 1997) discusses all the privileges that whites possess without even realizing or earning their advantage. Miller, Hyde, and Ruth (2004) state the following:

> It is important to recognize that dealing with privilege is an internal, painful, time-consuming process. Often, feelings of guilt, as well as moral and personal anguish arise, as instructors view and review their place in the privilege hierarchy. New skills, ideas and competencies must develop along with a deepening commitment to facilitate social change (p. 413).

Adams (2010) also discusses how the many forms of oppression interact and overlap. It is a limiting perspective to consider only one social category and that there are myriad ways in which one can be oppressed. Intersectionality assists with understanding one's unique social position in terms of oppression and discrimination and includes an analysis of structural power (Yamada, Werkmeister Rozas, & Cross-Denny, 2015)

The Undoing Racism WorkshopTM (People's Institute for Survival and Beyond, 2006) I attended utilizes a combination of defining racism, understanding it from a socio-historical context, social constructionism, and being responsible for change and taking action to address racism. Ultimately, through antiracist training, a new identity is formed (Derman-Sparks & Phillips, 1997). People of color "learn how not to collude in

their own oppression; whites learn how not to be oppressors." Paul (2004) gives a sense of hope that one can undo or unlearn these automatic patterns which play heavily in internalized racism. She states "that a slight pause in the processing of a stereotype gives conscious, unprejudiced beliefs a chance to take over. With time, the tendency to prevent automatic stereotyping may itself become automatic" (p. 521). Similarly, in the movie "The Color of Fear" (Wah, 1994), one of the group members uses the metaphor of a tape playing in his mind. He explains that when he finds himself thinking in terms of internalized racial stereotyping, that there is an automatic tape which plays and prejudges. The challenge becomes recognizing when this tape begins to play and to be able to develop an alternative tape that reverses the automatic stereotyping and to open one's mind to a different way of thinking.

Racial Identity Development

In order to address racism, we need to raise the consciousness of white people. Much has been written about racial identity development especially in regards to people of color. However, Helms's (1995) White Racial Identity Development model can help with understanding white guilt and white privilege and includes two main epigenic phases. The first phase includes a growing awareness of racism in society, moving from denial of privilege/racism to anger and intolerance. The second phase is redefining a healthy white identity from intellectualizing to gaining a deeper understanding of racism and to commit to antiracism.

White instructors have tremendous influence and responsibility in this process and they need to continue with their own self-development in this area. It is crucial to have self-awareness of their own deficits in terms of knowledge and skills as well as developing skill and competence in facilitating student learning through different pedagogical methods.

As a white faculty member in a predominantly white classroom, I am "uniquely positioned to engage white students in particular in discussions given the predominantly white settings in which they are situated" (Quaye, 2012, pp. 100-101). I believe it is my social and academic responsibility to hone my skills in facilitating these difficult dialogues and have worked on developing my capacity to facilitate this

pedagogical method for students. Avoiding these discussions or not being adequately prepared can present challenges in productive and necessary dialogue if progress is to be made towards addressing racism.

As students and facilitators are at different developmental phases in terms of anti-racist or anti-oppressive stances, the dialogue is not only fraught with potential problems, but through this conflictual process all participants can continue to develop their individual racial developmental trajectories. It is similar to the different levels of competence within the classroom that those at the higher level of integration or understanding build up those at the lower levels. Through teaching of others, one further develops their own capacity for understanding. It can also serve as a reminder of the developmental process of racial and cultural awareness and solidifies a sense of humility. It is a constant reflective process requiring self-examination through one's own narrative and dialogue is essential for continued progression.

Constructing a Deconstruction

Deconstructing the social construction of race can be accomplished through a variety of pedagogical techniques. Use of dialogue as well as intergroup dialogue can have tremendous power in the classroom (Zúñiga, Lopez, & Ford, 2012). Critical reflective analysis is grounded in the idea that knowledge is socially constructed. This model allows for a dynamic process by which there is an integration of the meaning of the experience: selecting an experience and conducting a personal reflection, a political analysis (e.g. social constructs, domination, privilege), critically analyzing self-reflection and analyzing the impact on one's practice (Campbell & Baikie, 2013). These experiential learning opportunities provide a conduit to better understand the meaning and manifestation of racism. It makes it real and helps with integration and raises racial consciousness (Aldana, Rowley, Checkoway, & Richards-Schuster, 2012).

Student Reflections

The students here are from several different majors and places in their education. It is to be noted that only one student identified that she was "non-white"

and biracial. If I were to base any categorization of the students' racial/ethnic background, it would be due to their complexion, and none of whom would present outwardly as black or African American. Their reflections are provided for illustrative purposes and they appear in alphabetical order by last name.

Ashleigh Betso, Social Work major, graduated, MSW student

This student describes how the experience of self-reflection through dialogue and journals assisted in her self-growth.

In today's world, the amount of information available to us makes it inexcusable to not spend the time learning about other races and cultures of the world. Along with that learning process for me was a much needed period of self-growth and reflection. Taking this class involved the discussion of controversial and difficult topics which was not always easy but absolutely essential. Our clients are not always going to be exactly the same as we are as social work practitioners; this is an important distinction to recognize early on in a social worker's career.

Through the use of our reflective journal assignments I was able to look deeper into my thoughts, feelings and prejudices. This allowed me to have deeper self-awareness and challenge my own beliefs. This led to a considerable amount of self-growth as a professional social worker. Starting the practice of consistent self-reflection is crucial in this helping profession. This class was one of the most influential classes I have taken in my undergraduate social work studies.

Emily Cusick, Nursing major, sophomore

Emily discusses her developing awareness of white privilege and to develop a more holistic understanding of diversity.

Prior to taking the course Human Diversity and Social Justice, I saw society as more progressive when it came to issues such as racism, sexism, etc. However, this class is what opened my eyes to the reality of today's society, which has only slightly progressed. A huge factor in this problem is privilege. Many individuals do not have to think about what they have or how lucky they are based on the advantages they

have with their social group. Privilege is beyond human rights, and today it is given rather than earned. I, myself did not truly realize how privileged I was. I do not walk into stores in fear that I will be suspected of shoplifting; I've never been segregated due to my race; I can succeed without people being surprised. I am lucky enough to be receiving a college education on a campus where privilege is so prevalent. It is so ironic that we are located in an urban location where just a few blocks away, the lack of privilege is just as prevalent. While we may be so close to it, we are still blind because we are accustomed to our own privilege. These seemingly minuscule factors make the biggest difference in society.

Another factor that has put a halt to any progress is white superiority. What does being "equal" mean? In today's society, we use the word "equal" but it means unification in the fact that we all act "white." One of the most important aspects I've taken from this class is that as a society, we must acknowledge the differences among individuals. Social justice is accepting these differences rather than accepting the preconceived notions.

This class truly challenged my beliefs and opened my eyes to how blind we can be as a society. In order to begin to understand, one must step outside their comfort zone and really look at society as a whole. While many progressive movements have made history, there is still so much that can be done in regards to social justice. Whether it is racism, sexism, or classism, the first step is to accept and embrace the differences.

Caitlin Doyle, Social Work major, senior

Caitlin reviews her experience in class and how her worldview and knowledge-base was challenged transforming her into a more culturally competent social worker.

The course challenged my thoughts, feelings, triggers, and biases by the diverse topics that we talked about in class; no topic was off limits. Although some of the discussions we had, films we watched, and activities we did may have been difficult, upsetting, or provoking, they were eye opening about the world that we live in, which I have never experienced in any other class before.

This course has educated me on how to be more competent of those around me through the exploration of various life experiences, including oppression, socialization, marginalization, privilege and power. Similarly, I have expanded my knowledge on different dimensions of diversity, such as class, race, gender, age, and sexual orientation. I am forever grateful that I took Cultural Competency because it has helped me find my voice, discover my own values, and grow into a more culturally aware individual. At the end of the day, I will always try my best to understand, appreciate, and respect those who are different from me, because to me that is the essence of being culturally competent.

Mikaela Marbot – English major, junior

Mikaela describes the process for her of the experience and having her worldview challenged and how it helped her to develop a better understanding of "suffering and injustice."

I can honestly say that this class truly changed the way that I view society and think about social justice and the various forms of oppression. Before I took the class I thought I was a relatively well-rounded individual. I tried to be aware of my surroundings and people's feelings and I always tried to say "the right thing" for each social context that I found myself in. I don't have to try anymore though, because this class taught me how to understand different social situations instead of just think about them.

It's true that you never really understand something until you experience it. Each week the professor knew how to engage the class and make everyone *feel* the pain, the suffering, the humiliation of the current issue at hand. Instead of thinking in black and white and one shade of gray, I learned to comprehend things on multitudes of gray scales that I never knew existed. It's easy to think that knowing what a particular stereotype is makes one knowledgeable, but there's so much more than just knowing about a problem. To truly understand one must experience the problem and feel the weight of it pushing down on his/her shoulders.

I felt that weight. I experienced the pain and confusion that stereotypes and oppression bring to people. I learned to understand. I learned to be a better person and honestly I am now finally a better-rounded human

being. I have a greater grasp of life and suffering and injustice now more than I ever did before taking this course.

Shauna Santos-Dempsey - Social Work major, sophomore

Shauna reviews the impact of privilege and how she is beginning to recognize her own privilege and to work towards social justice.

As a prospective social work major I took Human Diversity and Social Justice in the fall semester of my sophomore year. Prior to my experience in this course the only exposure I had to the "isms" of our world occurred in community outreach programs and the brief discussions in political science courses. Even so, my limited experience was further narrowed as a result of the sensitive nature of service programs and the discomfort that accompanied confronting one's own privilege in a high school classroom without a facilitator trained in diversity education. However, I can fervently attest to the success and effectiveness of Human Diversity and Social Justice.

This course altered the way that I think in a positive way, one that has changed my life. The most difficult aspect of the course was confronting my own privilege and disadvantages. However, the result has confirmed my passion for social work and, more importantly, given me the tools to encourage my peers to evaluate their own privilege. I am no longer fearful of being the only person to deny the humor of a racist joke. I have no qualms about discussing racism, classism, sexism, ageism, ableism, and other forms of oppression with other adults in my life and urging them to consider how we can all make a difference with seemingly insignificant behavioral changes. Rather than sympathizing with or pitying those who face discrimination, I have learned to empathize and allow the emotions that arise to fuel my enthusiasm in the fight for equality. I now recognize that evaluating my own privilege, confronting personal biases, and working towards social justice is a lifelong journey in which everyone should partake.

Conclusion: Reflections on Reflecting

As a social work educator, I often say that I am a

social worker first, then an educator. I approach my work through a social work perspective. I seek to engage the class, build trust, provide a safe environment, and then get to the work at hand. But, I am always checking in and evaluating our work together: how are we doing; what, if anything, can or should we do differently? And, then we end, whether it is the end of the class session, or the end of the semester. Endings are important, too. This is where we often learn the most.

I utilize the framework provided by Adams et al. (2010) of comfort zones, learning edges, and triggers. We review this at the beginning of the semester and revisit it throughout our weeks together. I tell them we want to get to the learning edge, but go back to our comfort zone. I do not want them falling of the edge! That means listening. Listening to the class, to what they say, how they say it. Listening for when there is an opportunity to move deeper into the topic, and listening for when to stop.

Our university conducts a colloquia series as part of the core curriculum, and our social work and criminal justice departments offered an examination of the Garner and Brown incidents. One of the questions I was asked during this presentation was: what is the best way to address or eliminate racism? I believe firmly and answered: "Education and dialogue." We must learn about it, talk about it, and listen to each other. Dialogue demystifies the "other." It transforms us into "We." Our nation needs this more than ever. We cannot delay any longer. The time is now.

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