

**(Don't) Take it Personal:
What university students learned from themselves
and their peers about racism and stereotyping?**

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Abstract: This paper describes a course where a group of graduate students decoded racism and its impacts through collaborative and peer based learning in a Canadian post-secondary institution. During this course, students first reviewed racism's historical influence on immigration policy, Aboriginal community, and the evolution of multiculturalism in Canada. Second, they analyzed how multiculturalism was reflected in today's Canadian society in terms of demographic composition, immigrations trends, and participation in post-secondary education. Third, through decoding racism and stereotypes, students went on a journey to explore their identities, cultural heritages, and status quos.

This course achieved a great amount of success as 1) Students not only developed a deeper understanding of racism theoretically but also related to it personally. 2) Students contributed and benefited from peer based learning. The course was driven by students. Through group discussions, presentations, and additional learning materials students brought, the scope of the learning was broaden and enriched. 3) Learning did not stop after the class ended. Many students acted on what they learned.

Keywords: racism, post-secondary education, Canada, Asia

Whose knowledge and understanding are we learning? How power dominance has impacted students of color? In this paper we took a close look at a group of graduate students in a course that focused on race and nation building at a research university in Canada. We explored our understanding of race and nation and how Whiteness shapes the legal and social identifies of others, in and out of the classroom. The purpose of this paper is to provide an in-depth exploration into the symbolic interactions between interracial peer relationships, relationships with teachers, and extracurricular participation. Race, gender, generation, school, and community ethos are some of the factors that shape our identities and behaviours in the classroom. Through stories and voices of individual students along with the observation of the authors, this paper illustrates the various ways white students acknowledge "whiteness" and "whiteness as the standard of others" (Lee, 2005, p. 123), and how students of color responded to their marginalization and social disenfranchisement.

The class took place in the west coast city of British Columbia, Canada, unique in its mixed and diverse population. Fifty-six percent of all recent immigrants (those who arrived in the preceding five years) in 2001 were from East Asia, and 67% of all recent immigrants came from five source countries: China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, India and the Philippines (City of Vancouver, Social Planning, 2003). In British Columbia, the Chinese were not simply the inhabitants of an exotic and distant land, but a major and visible proportion of the population.

History

Examination of past attitudes and practices helps us to understand that notions of equity we sometimes take for granted are just as socially constructed today as they ever were. As the history of colonialism testifies, membership in the nation has been zealously guarded in the interests of a few.

- 1871 British Columbia entered into the Canadian Confederation. First Nations people and Asian were disenfranchised. At the time, First Nations people were the overwhelming majority of the population, and the Chinese were one-sixth of the remaining population (Staley, 2003). This was a significant step to claim that Whites properly “belonged” in British Columbia and First Nations people and Asians did not.
- 1885 The Indian Act
The Chinese became the only group subjected to an immigration head tax whereas certain Europeans were encouraged to immigrate to Canada by receiving free land (Staley, 2003).
- Later Through a series of federal and provincial policies, Chinese were barred from working on Crown contracts or for certain operations, and from practicing professions, such as law, pharmacy and teaching (Staley, 2003).
- 1923 The enactment of the Chinese Immigration Act excluded Chinese from immigrating to Canada (Staley, 2003)

In a little more than fifty years, Chinese and First Nations were disenfranchised, discriminated, and socially segregated despite the fact that they were the majority of the population at the time. The ideology of white supremacy was constructed through political and ideological definitions, which claimed that Whites properly “belonged” in and Asians and First Nations people did not. “Race” was used to justify political and social policies against Chinese and First Nations people. Arguably, British Columbia became a White supremacist society, at least in terms of non-whites. To enforce the White supremacist ideology to the next generations, schools played an important role. First Nations children were taken from their parents and forced into residential schools, a system of controlled missionary-run schools funded federally. In the provincial public school system, Asians students were segregated into “special” classes for at least part of their education. The residential schools left generations of First Nations students with dark images of the public educational system, which had a profound influence on the dropout rate and academic achievement on First Nations students today. School textbooks were particularly important in transmitting a nexus of ideas about patriotism, citizenship “character” which made supremacist notions virtually impossible to challenge. To some extent, the racial imagery fostered “an ideology of difference” which legitimated the White occupations of British Columbia as both natural and morally acceptable (Barman & Gleason, 2003).

First week

The majority (14 out of 16) of the students in the class were from the field of education, including seven masters’ students, two Ph.D. students, four public school teachers, all of which were white female, and a visiting scholar from East Asia. There were three males and thirteen females. Within the male group, there was one African American, one white, and an East Asian. Among the female minority students, there was one Asian international student, one new immigrant from Asia, one Asian Canadian, one East Asian Canadian, and two aboriginal students. Fifty percent of the students were white including seven females with two French Canadians and one Doukhobour Canadian. The department that hosted the course was devoted to social issues in education at K-12 level through post-secondary, including adult education. The instructor was a well-known historian of education.

The learning pedagogy was class discussions based on the relevant readings. The seminar was divided into two parts: the first part was to cover tools, concepts, and context of race, nation, and education, the second part was divided into the five racialized colors, White, Yellow, Red, Brown, and Black. It enabled students to relate to their racialized experience in class, community and the larger society.

Boundaries on speech based “who” is in the classroom

The presence of non-minorities changed the dynamics of the language used. The introduction of stereotypical phrases or images generated various verbal and non-verbal actions. When a stereotype was used within a minority group, it lost its critique. If the minority used the stereotype against the majority, it had a diminished effect. Ironically, towards the end of the course, certain stereotypes were acknowledged in a sense of newfound awareness. However, when the dominant group directed a stereotype against a minority, there was uneasiness in the room and the discussions tended to intensify and at times became confrontational. This revealed the imbalance of power between minorities and the dominant group.

The second part of the class was sectioned into the colors that represented the races: White, Yellow, Red, Brown, and Black. The instructor to elicit a reaction from the students purposely created the non-politically correct display. What is interesting was the strongest objections came from the white students, outraged and astonished to see the blatant segregation in such an overt fashion. The non-Asian minority students were also offended but considered the situation par for course and absorbable. Another point to note was that using “black” as the most obvious opposite to white was commonly referenced to exemplify racism – thus artificially equating blackness and racism. From the outset, this linkage polarized the initial discussions in terms of extremes. On the color racism spectrum, the measurement was not linear but vertical, with white on top, black on the bottom, and the other colors in between ranging in superiority based on proximity to the top. The closer the skin color is to white the closer it is to whiteness, if only in the eyes of that individual or group. It is now coincidence that the conjured image to represent minorities in American is black and in Canada is red (Aboriginal people). Many Asians do not consider themselves as minority as yellow is closer to white and also because many of them have a connection to identify with a homeland, which is similar to white identifying themselves to their European heritage. Yellow or brown was less symbolic in its representation of race compared with White, black, and red. At the beginning of the class, being an Asian international student, I did not identify with yellow neither did I identify with “Asian”. I identified myself and other people by nationality. To me, a person’s skin color was of little importance when it comes to their identity.

Personal stories of reflection on racism

This section describes observations and analysis of students’ personal experience and stories in and out of the class.

Observation of an Asian Canadian student and an Asian International Student

Growing up in an affluent Asian immigrant family, the Asian Canadian student was unable to relate to the stereotypes of Asian from Orientalism- “othering”, which described Asian as hard labourers, men wearing pigtailed, and owners of dry cleaning establishments. However, when later on she travelled to Asia, she failed to relate to the local people as she could not speak the language and realized the “Canadian” part of her identity. She was very

out-spoken. She was very much aware of racism and was involved with anti-racism groups. She brought many materials to the class including books, pictures, and activist newspapers.

As an Asian international student, when I first sat in the classroom I was unaware of the dynamics among different groups. As the concept of Whiteness was introduced, I was able to witness the dominance of whiteness (intentionally and unintentionally). The translation between white and the interpretation of whiteness was fascinating. The voice of the dominant groups excluded others. In the case of Canada, anybody who is not Christian Anglo-Saxophone was subjected to denigration and social disenfranchisement.

The awareness of racism and discrimination did not bring me power; instead, it brought a sense of helplessness and disgust. The question raised was “what now”. “What could I do to make a difference? What can I do to increase awareness of the diversity within the classroom and Asian community? What can I do to encourage people to step out their assumptions and prejudice to see people as who they truly are?”

Discussion

People of Asian heritage are diverse and as are their achievements “cannot be understood from within the immigrant versus involuntary minority dichotomy” (Lee, 1996). However, a question that often arose was, “How Asian students struggled with the fact that most non-Asians were unable to differentiate among them?” Interestingly, Asian students in the class identified their descent in terms of their nationality - emigrating mainly from China, Korea, and Japan with diverse English proficiency, academic achievement, and socioeconomic status. The general assumption of the non-Asian students caste them as the model-minority students described by the media as quiet, obedient, and hardworking. Despite their cultural and linguistic differences, Asian-identified students felt a common bond as immigrants but rarely interacted with black and the majority white students outside class - at first. Asian Canadian students spoke of the sense of responsibility and guilt stemming from their parents’ sacrifices and about their desire to develop dual identities by “learning Canadian ways” to succeed, while simultaneously maintaining ties to their traditions and people.

The work in whiteness studies has gone in many different theoretical directions, and spans a variety of disciplines and genres (Levine-Rasky, 2002). We pose to address the topics of ethnic and national identity, power struggles, and the politics of gender and social class within the classroom as it pertains to graduate Asian Canadian students and the commercialization of stereotyping in Canada. Asian Canadians are stereotyped as model minorities who achieve academic and economic success through hard work and talent. Such a characterization suggests that all people of Asian heritage experience success, thereby denying the existence of poverty and lack of opportunities that many endure. This monolithic view presupposes a group whose “inherent cultural values” and voluntary minority status propel them to success in school. Furthermore, the stereotype implies that equal opportunity exists for all people, that it blames those who fail to achieve for not working hard enough, thus diverting attention away from the inequitable power structures in our society. In truth, “social distancing of privilege” (p. 129), keeps white people from seeing the existence of inequitable social structures and systems (Levine-Rasky, 2002 p, 129).

Rather than challenging assumptions and empowering students to be active agents for change, multiculturalism is often narrowly equated with domestic identity politics and its focus on managing diversity (Lee, 2005). The multiculturalism expressed in class not only celebrated difference and “otherness”, but also sought to contain it, fixing minority “others”

into discrete boxes of racial and ethnic identity. Newly arrived Asian immigrants in particular, are thus forced to assume the “Asian-Canadian” label regardless of their individual identifications. When in the class structure there are implications of how dominance and subordination are reproduced by the school as a social vehicle.

French Canadian & Doukhobour Canadian

The first assignment in the course was “How are we racialized?”. Students took a reflective approach to thinking about how our identities were racialized in school, community and the larger society. It was a wake up call to many that “White” was a color and white was racialized. At first, the “white” students identified them as “Canadian” rather than “white”. The question then shifted to “what it means to be ‘Canadian’?” The whiteness of being “Canadian” informs white as norm and standard as “Canadian” and therefore defines otherness.

Within the group of “white” students, there were students identifying themselves as “Canadian” and students identifying themselves as “Quebecois”. Quebecois strongly resisted the dominant Anglo-European tradition as part of their identity and trying to maintain their francophone heritage. For instance, a “Québécois” student was proud to be called a “frog” which was a nickname given by English-speaking Canadian to ridicule their accent when they spoke English. Students who identified themselves as “Canadian” embraced the Anglo-European heritage as their “national identity”. The Doukhobour Canadian was an example of *religious* racism where a group was discriminated based on ancestry or different religious practice.

There is an historical connection between racism and colonialism. Although the discussion of “Quebecois” has evoked debate nation wide, especially when the election comes near, the identity and civil rights of Asian, Aboriginal people and other groups are left unchallenged. Multiculturalism in Canada is still superficial, which mostly happens in domestic environment and is used as political cover-up.

White Dominance in the Class

Gender correlates with race and class informs and limits the experiences of the students (Lee, 1996). As the only white male in the class, he tried to lead the discussions. He usually spoke first and at length. Although he was a minority in number, he tended to pasture dominance through his physical stature. He found himself speaking for the entire dominant group – white male, to address many “whys”.

Another example of white dominance was demonstrated in students’ participation styles and whether their contributions were validated in the class. The East Asian visiting scholar had a very formal participation style. Trained in a country with extended colonial history, he asked question after question from his written notes and often answered his own questions in the process. He brought insightful critiques of the readings but failed to engage other students. It quickly became a monopoly and non-inclusive discussion. The white students generally had a more informal participation style. As the discussion of whiteness proceeded, white students started to identify themselves in terms of “whiteness” even though none of the non-white students identified themselves before they spoke. The color white was acknowledged but the other colors were taken for granted without being challenged. Many discussions turned into a defensive posturing. One particular exchanged focused on whether racism is a matter of individual unawareness, misunderstanding, or merely meanness rather than a power

imbalance within the social structures. "...I cannot be a racist if I have friends who are people of color" was uttered on several occasions.

Discussion

The dominant representation of racism in mainstream education is isolated in discrete incidents that some individuals may or may not "do", and goes beyond naming specific privileges (McIntosh, 1986). Whites are theorized as actively shaped, affected, defined, and privileged through their racialization and their individual and collective consciousness formed within it (Frankenberg, 1997; Morrison, 1992; Tatum, 1992).

People of white descent have constructed a worldview, "social ideal" and a norm, and have been successful at spreading it around the world. Whiteness refers to dimensions of racism that serve to elevate White people over people of color. Scholars who examine Whiteness contend that to name Whiteness is to refer to a set of locations that are historically, socially, politically, and culturally produced, and that are intrinsically linked to dynamic relations of domination (Dyer, 1997; Frankenberg, 1993; Roediger, 1997). "Whiteness is a location of structural advantage, of race privilege. Second, it is a 'standpoint,' a place from which White people look at themselves, at others, and at society. Third, 'whiteness' refers to a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed" (p.1). Hegemonic messages about race and "goodness" from the dominant white majority become the standard by which others in various shades of "darkness" are judged. Race is conceptualized as a constellation of processes and practices rather than as a bounded entity. Whiteness and 'normal' Canadian identification are constructed as one and the same (Lee, 2005). Levine-Rasky (2002) identified three discourses of whiteness: individualism, anti-racist racial consciousness, and defensive whiteness. The themes echoed whiteness as "invisibly normative and hence unimportant" (p. 164) which ignored the impact of race upon life choices and chances. Thus, people become defensive when confronted with the possibility that their change of positionality may open up social and economic possibilities for people of color. These include colorblind thinking and liberal humanism, which are both premised upon not seeing racial differences as particularly meaningful and race traitorship, which parallels an antiracist racial consciousness. The real issue is not to conceptualize Whiteness as a fixed and unified "thing", but rather as a set of practices, including the practice of Whites racializing others but not themselves (Lee, 2005).

Aboriginal Students

There were two aboriginal female students. One was older with experiences working as a counsellor for aboriginal students. She rarely spoke unless we were talking about issues in relate to aboriginal education. At the last class, she brought a drum and performed a traditional celebration with everyone in the classroom. In a sense, she had to re-establish herself to proclaim her indigenous identification, a product of the residency schooling, to combat her Canadian categorization.

The class was seated in a U shape pattern with the students of Asian background sitting side-by-side and white students on the other side of the room. The other aboriginal student did not clearly present herself as First Nation. She sat between white students and was not engaged in the discussions. Her identity was hidden behind a punk-rock image with dyed red hair, piercing, and tattoos.

Most classes and texts that focus on race and racial identity formation in education emphasize the impact of racism on students of color (Lee, 1996; Olsen, 1998; Valenzuela,

2001). Dyer (1997) argues that “the point of seeing the racing of Whites is to dislodge them/us from the position of power, with all the inequities, oppressions, privileges and sufferings in its train, dislodging them by undercutting the authority by which they/we speak and act in and on the world” (p. 2). Data confirms that teachers and counsellors occupy a critical position in the lives of minority students (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Such institutional authority figures have the potential to play counter-hegemonic roles in the lives of immigrant minority children and to help marginalized groups acquire social capital to better their chances at success (Stanton-Salazar, 1997).

Conclusion

White students may be able to deconstruct whiteness through exploring their own heritages and social class, maintaining, deconstructing the identities of ethnic majorities, with as much purpose and vigour as that of minority groups, should be a vital component of antiracist practice (Morrison, 1992). In classrooms, we must unravel stereotypes that deny the complexity and fluidity of individual identities that are shaped by the ever-changing social contexts in which they evolve. There should be a call to redesigned teacher education programs that help teacher-to-be to study and rearticulate their identities, in which pedagogical practices would aim to disrupt power hierarchies, and consequently, white privilege. “Working through whiteness requires whites to become strangers, to stand aside and witness their own traditions” (Levine-Rasky, 2002, p. 226). In so doing, they can then begin to learn to reconstruct social relations in ways that are more equitable.

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