

## Folks:

The following are extracts from an article in the book *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice: A Sourcebook*, edited by Maurianne Adams, Lee Anne Bell and Pat Griffin, pp. 82-109. (New York and London: Routledge, 1997). Material that I have deleted from the original is indicated by [...].

## Racism-Curriculum Design

Charmaine L. Wijeyesinghe,  
Pat Griffin, Barbara Love

### Introduction

Teaching about racism in the United States is a complex and emotional process. Participants typically bring to class a wide range of feelings, experiences, and awarenesses. Most participants sincerely want to learn about racism and how they can play a role in making their communities, schools, and workplaces welcoming places for people of all racial and cultural heritages. Yet fear, distrust, anger, denial, guilt, ignorance, naivete, and the wish for simple solutions can fill the learning process with surprises and emotional intensity. In our experience, however, participation in racism courses can transform awareness and encourage anti-racist action to reflect a more sophisticated understanding of and increased commitment to ending racism.

Our approach is based on the perspective that race is a social construction rather than a biological or genetic essence (Omi & Winant, 1986). This perspective is supported by work in physical anthropology showing that there is at least as much variation among people within racial groups as there is between different racial groups (Jacoby & Glauberman, 1995). We believe that racial categories do, however, have potent social meaning. An understanding of the history of how racial categories in the United States have been constructed and legislated by North Americans of European descent to justify privilege, colonialism, murder, and theft of whole cultures forms the basis for our work (Takaki, 1993). This history is evident when various racial categories have been created or changed to meet the emerging economic and social needs of white United States culture (Steinberg, 1989). Racial categories artificially emphasize the relatively small external physical differences among people and leave room for the creation of false notions of mental, emotional, and intellectual differences as well.

In our racism classes we identify people of European descent as the agent group and people of African, Asian, Native American, and Latin descent as the target groups. The complexities inherent in addressing racism become immediately apparent as we encounter this key question: What are the indicators or determinants of racial identity if we believe race is socially constructed? Is it physical appearance? Is it family of origin? Is it cultural or political affiliation? Is it language? What about white-skinned Latinos? Why are Jews not identified as a targeted racial group? How about biracial people? What about the history of discrimination directed at Irish Americans in the United States? Where do Arabs or others of Middle Eastern heritage fit in this model? What about a white person with a distant Native American ancestor?

We address these questions in a variety of ways. First, we acknowledge that the models we use for understanding racism are not the only way to address these issues and that we are providing a starting point for discussion. We believe that any attempt to categorize people is inherently problematic and we invite different perspectives. Second, we make it clear that we are focusing on racism in the contemporary United States. Third, we invite participants to focus on not only how they identify themselves, but also how others identify and respond to them based on their skin color, language, and culture as they negotiate their lives in the United States. For example, we encourage a person of primarily European heritage who has a distant Native American ancestor to consider the extent to which he or she is targeted by society because of this heritage, and how and if this ancestry affects their ability to gain access to the benefits offered in society. Our goal is to enter a dialogue that will challenge students to understand racism and to become clearer about how their own racial identities affect their experience of relative privilege or disadvantage.

It is important when planning a racism course to take into account issues in the campus environment and in the broader social context that affect how students are thinking and feeling. A number of these issues shape the beliefs students bring into the class and are discussed in the section that follows.

### Belief in Meritocracy and Individualism

Many students bring a firm belief that, in the United States, if individuals work hard, they will earn economic and social rewards that are just and fair. White students often express resentment about legislated interventions such as affirmative action or school busing because these strategies violate their belief in the fundamental fairness of American society by giving racial minorities or women what they see as an

unfair advantage. When students bring these concerns to classes they provide excellent opportunities to explore the history of racism in the United States, differences between prejudice and power, white skin privilege and rights for all, patterns of discrimination, and the dehumanizing effects of racism on white people even though they are not targeted by it.

### **Theories of Racial Inferiority or Superiority**

The publication of Herrnstein and Murray's *The Bell Curve* (1994) and the ensuing discussion of innate genetically coded abilities provide some white students with an easy explanation for the persistence of underachievement, poverty, and crime among African Americans and a misinformed justification for inequality and racial stratification (Fraser, 1995). This explanation also allows them to avoid understanding their own privilege and the need to take action against racism. Teachers in racism courses must be prepared to address the issues raised by these genetic or biological explanations for racial inequity and to help students understand them in the larger context of racism as a social and cultural phenomenon. Discussion of these issues provides opportunities to talk about how science can be misused to perpetuate racism.

### **Conflict and Antagonism Among Targeted Racial Groups**

Sometimes conflicts arise within and among groups of Black, Asian, Latino, and Native American students. For example, there are rival antagonisms among young Black and Puerto Rican people that erupt in violence and loss of life, and inner city Blacks who resent Korean or Chinese shopkeepers in their neighborhoods. When this conflict is focused on claims about who is more oppressed, we believe it is important to acknowledge the differences in heritage and history of oppression for different groups in the United States as well as the differences in how targeted racial groups are treated. However, we focus on understanding the underlying dynamics of racism that affect all of these groups. Therefore, we stress the benefits of building coalitions and identifying costs of horizontal oppression and our belief that inter- and intra-group hostility is a by-product of racism in which targeted groups are forced into competing with each other for scarce resources.

### **Tendency to Focus on One Targeted Racial Group**

It is important not to frame racism exclusively as a Black-White issue or as an issue based solely on skin color. This tendency might be more or less likely depending on the demographics of the geographic area in which the course is taught. Participants need to understand the particular dynamics of racism among racial groups in their geographic area as well as to become aware of racism in other parts of the United States. It is important to address the complexities of racism by including all targeted racial groups in class readings, discussions, and examples and by acknowledging the effects of color as well as culture and language on the treatment of targeted racial groups.

### **The Place of Ethnicity in a Racism Class**

The relationship between race and ethnicity is not a simple one. We define ethnicity as a sub-category of race. In this chapter, we use the broad racial categories of White, Black, Asian, Latino/a, and Native American. Within each of these racial categories are many ethnic identities which often become blurred or lost within the broader racial designation. For example, the Asian racial category includes ethnic groups such as Chinese, Japanese, Thai, Cambodian, Vietnamese, and Pacific Islanders. White students often do not think of themselves as members of ethnic groups and may not know much about their German, Italian, Irish, French, English, or Scottish heritages. One of the trade offs for white ethnics who migrated to the United States was to give up their ethnic heritage in return for unnamed racial privilege. The same process, of course, did not occur for People of Color whose ethnicity gets subsumed under race. Understanding and identifying white ethnicity, especially European ethnicity, sometimes helps students understand how derivatives of Anglo European culture have come to embody the essence of what we mean by "American" culture. Identifying their ethnicity can also help white students affirm aspects of their white identities. We believe white students are better prepared to address racism with a sense of affirmation rather than shame or guilt about being white.

Some participants are confused about whether to identify Jewishness as a racial, ethnic or religious identity. Because Jews have a distinct religion, a rich tradition, language, culture, and history, they have been historically identified as both a racial and an ethnic group. We believe that there are unique historical aspects of Jewish oppression that distinguish it from contemporary United States racism targeting Blacks, Asians, Latinos, and Native Americans. We address the historical oppression of Jews as a separate issue in our courses and do not address it in our discussions of contemporary racism in this chapter. (See chapter 9 for a discussion of antisemitism.)

## **Students with Biracial or Multiracial Identities**

Discussing racial identities and racism with the implicit assumption that all students can clearly place themselves in one racial category or another denies the experience of many people. In reality, most of us are a mix of various racial and ethnic identities. The already complex nature of racism is complicated further for people who identify themselves as biracial and whose families include both agents and targets. As in other forms of oppression where some people do not fit neatly into binary categories (bisexuals, transgendered people), it is important to acknowledge the full diversity of experience with regard to racism.

## **Black Nationalism and Other Social Movements; Encouraging Racial Pride Among Targeted Groups**

As targeted racial groups become impatient, frustrated, and angry about the intransigence of racism in the United States, they identify strategies and philosophies that promote racial pride and empowerment for themselves and other members of their targeted racial groups. Many white students (and faculty) regard some of the spokespersons or leaders of these groups as divisive and controversial. Teachers need to be prepared to help all students understand these issues in the context of racism and to challenge students to consider the histories of oppression endured by targeted racial groups that leads to their advocacy of racial pride and empowerment.

## **Allegations of Separatism**

On some campuses, Black, Latino /a, Asian, or Native American students prefer to live together in designated sections of residence halls, join separate fraternities and sororities or other campus-based organizations, or participate in separate events like dances, Pow-Wows, and black homecomings. Many campuses also sponsor cultural centers for students of African, Asian, Latino/a, or Native American descent. In addition, many colleges include academic programs in African American, Asian, Native American, and Latino/ a Studies. White students sometimes struggle to understand why these "special" programs are needed and express concern that their existence encourages segregation and, therefore, makes racism worse. These issues, when raised in a racism class, become opportunities to help students understand the pervasiveness of white culture on most campuses and the tendency to notice and name actions of target group members differently from the naming of actions of their own group. (White students' living and socializing together is not thought of as separatism.) Students can also learn the differences between chosen separation and forced segregation and the need for the former in a racist society.

## **Issues of Naming**

Deciding what language to use to refer to different racial groups is a challenging process. Self-chosen names preferred by different racial groups change over time and there is no unanimity in preference for one name over another among members of the same racial group. The rigidity of insisting that only one name is acceptable antagonizes participants and violates the need to name oneself rather than be named.

In this book we have chosen to refer to the agent group in racism as Whites. We refer to the several racial groups targeted by racism as People of Color. Some groups prefer ALANA, which includes African, Latino, Asian, and Native American. When referring to specific targeted racial groups we use the terms Asian, Black, Latino, and Native American. We recognize that other names are preferable to some people and encourage facilitators to choose racial group names that are consistent with geographical norms and the needs of targeted groups to name themselves, rather than be named by agents.

[...]

## **[Concepts and Definitions]**

*Culture:* Aspects of a social environment that are used to communicate values such as what is considered good and desirable, right and wrong, normal, different, appropriate, or attractive. The means through which society creates a context from which individuals derive meaning and prescriptions for successful living within that culture (language and speech patterns, orientation toward time, standards (if beauty, holidays that are celebrated, images of a "normal" family).

*Cultural Racism (Racism at the Cultural Level):* Those aspects of society that overtly and covertly, attribute value and normality to white people and Whiteness, and devalue, stereotype, and label, People of Color as "other," different, less than, or render them invisible; Examples of these norms include defining white skin tones as nude or flesh colored, having a future time orientation, emphasizing individualism as opposed to a more collective ideology, defining one form of English as standard, and identifying only Whites as the great writers or composers.

*Institutions:* Established societal networks that covertly or overtly control the allocation of resources to individuals and social groups and that set and influence cultural norms and values. Examples of social institutions include the legal and criminal justice system, various forms of media, banks, schools, and organizations that control access to, or the quality of employment and education. In addition, since religious groups, family units, governmental bodies, and civic organizations influence social norms, policies, and practices, these agencies can also be defined as social institutions.

*Institutional Racism (Racism at the Institutional Level):* The network of institutional structures, policies, and practices that create advantages and benefits for Whites, and discrimination, oppression, and disadvantage for people from targeted racial groups. The advantages created for Whites are often invisible to them, or are considered "rights" available to everyone as opposed to "privileges" awarded to only some individuals and groups.

*White Privilege:* The concrete benefits of access to resources and social rewards and the power to shape the norms and values of society which Whites receive, unconsciously or consciously, by virtue of their skin color in a racist society. Privileges include the ability to be unaware of race, the ability to live and work among people of the same racial group as their own, the security of not being pulled over by the police for being a suspicious person, the expectation that they speak for themselves and not for their entire race, the ability to have a job hire or promotion attributed to their skills and background and not affirmative action (McIntosh, 1990).

*Collusion:* Thinking and acting in ways which support the system of racism. White people can actively collude by joining groups which advocate white supremacy. All people can collude by term. racist jokes, discriminating against a Person of Color, or remaining silent when observing a racist incident or remark. We believe that both Whites and People of Color can collude with racism through their attitudes, beliefs, and actions.

*Horizontal Racism:* The result of people of targeted racial groups believing, acting on, or enforcing the dominant (White) system of racial discrimination and oppression. Horizontal racism can occur between members of the same racial group (an Asian person telling another Asian wearing a sari to "dress like an American"; a Latino telling another Latino to stop speaking Spanish), or between members of different, targeted racial groups (Latinos believing stereotypes about Native Americans; Blacks not wanting Asians to move into a predominantly Black neighborhood).

*Internalized Racism:* The result of people of targeted racial groups believing, acting on, or enforcing, the dominant system of beliefs about themselves and members of their own racial group. Examples include Blacks using creams to lighten their skin, Latinos believing that the most competent administrators or leaders are white, Native Americans feeling that they cannot be as intelligent as Whites, Asians believing that racism is the result of People of Color not being able to raise themselves "by their own bootstraps."

*Ally:* A white person who actively works to eliminate racism. This person may be motivated by self-interest in ending racism, a sense of moral obligation, or a commitment, to foster social justice, as opposed to a paternalizing agenda of "wanting to help those poor, People of Color." A white ally may engage in anti-racism work with other, Whites and/or People of Color.

*Empowered Person of Color:* An empowered Person of Color has an understanding of racism and its impact on one's life without responding to the events and circumstances as a victim. Rather, being empowered means the capacity to engage individuals and institutions with an expectation of being treated well.

*Discrimination:* The differential allocation of goods, resources, and services, and the limitation of access to full participation in society based on individual membership in a particular social group.

*Race:* A social construct that artificially divides people into distinct groups based on characteristics such as physical appearance (particularly color), ancestral heritage, cultural affiliation, cultural history, ethnic classification, and the social, economic, and political needs of a society at a given period of time. Racial categories subsume ethnic groups.

*Ethnicity:* A social construct which divides people into smaller social groups based on characteristics such as shared sense of group membership, values, behavioral patterns, language, political and economic interest, history and ancestral geographical base. Examples of different ethnic groups are Cape Verdean, Haitian, African American (Black); Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese (Asian); Cherokee, Mohawk, Navajo (Native American). Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican (Latino); Polish, Irish, and French (White).

*Racial and Ethnic Identity:* An individual's awareness and experience of being a member of a racial and ethnic group; the racial and ethnic categories that an individual chooses to describe him or herself based on such factors as biological heritage, physical appearance, cultural affiliation, early socialization, and personal experience.

*Racism:* The systematic subordination of members of targeted racial groups who have relatively little social power in the United States (Blacks, Latino/as, Native Americans, and Asians), by the members of the agent racial group who have relatively more racial power (Whites). This subordination is supported by the actions of individuals, cultural norms and values, and the institutional structures and practices of society.

*Individual Racism:* The beliefs, attitudes, and actions of individuals that support or perpetuate racism. Individual racism can occur at both an unconscious and conscious level, and can be both active and passive. Examples include telling a racist joke, using a racial epithet, or believing in the inherent superiority of Whites.

*Active Racism:* Actions which have as their stated or explicit goal the maintenance of the system of racism and the oppression of those in the targeted racial groups. People who participate in active racism advocate the continued subjugation of members of the targeted groups and protection of "the rights" of members of the agent group. These goals are often supported by a belief in the inferiority of People of Color and the superiority of white people, culture, and values.

*Passive Racism:* Beliefs, attitudes, and actions that contribute to the maintenance of racism, without openly advocating violence or oppression. The conscious and unconscious maintenance of attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors that support the system of racism, racial prejudice, and racial dominance.

[...]

## **Appendix 6B Becoming an Ally**

What Is an Ally? An ally is a member of the agent social group who takes a stand against social injustice directed at target groups (Whites who speak out against racism, men who are anti-sexist). An ally works to be an agent of social change rather than an agent of oppression. When a form of oppression has multiple target groups, as do racism, ableism, and heterosexism, target group members can be allies to other targeted social groups they are not part of (lesbians can be allies to bisexual people, African American people can be allies to Native Americans, blind people can be allies to people who use wheelchairs).

### **Characteristics of an Ally**

Feels good about own social group membership; is comfortable and proud of own identity

Takes responsibility for learning about own and target group heritage, culture, and experience, and how oppression works in everyday life

Listens to and respects the perspectives and experiences of target group members

Acknowledges unearned privileges received as a result of agent status and works to eliminate or change privileges into rights that target group members also enjoy

Recognizes that unlearning oppressive beliefs and actions is a lifelong process, not a single event, and welcomes each learning opportunity

Is willing to take risks, try new behaviors, act in spite of own fear and resistance from other agents

Takes care of self to avoid burn-out

Acts against social injustice out of a belief that it is in her/his own self-interest to do so

Is willing to make mistakes, learn from them, and try again

Is willing to be confronted about own behavior and attitudes and consider change

Is committed to taking action against social injustice in own sphere of influence

Understands own growth and response patterns and when she/he is on a learning edge

Understands the connections among all forms of social injustice

Believes she/he can make a difference by acting and speaking out against social injustice

Knows how to cultivate support from other allies.

---

END OF DOCUMENT