

The Whiteness Project: A Pedagogical Tool for Scholars of Race and Ethnicity

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Abstract

In this article, I briefly reflect upon the need to teach about whiteness in courses on race and ethnicity in the United States, and present the *Whiteness Project* as a tool to aid in doing so.

Keywords: whiteness, pedagogy, multimedia tools, race

In a chapter of *Darkwater*, titled *The Souls of White Folk*, W.E.B. Du Bois argues that the “discovery of personal whiteness among the world’s peoples is a very modern thing—a nineteenth and twentieth century matter. The ancient world would have laughed at such a distinction... Today we have changed all that, and the world in a sudden, emotional conversion has discovered that it is white and by that token, wonderful” (Du Bois, 1920, p. 17). He goes on to liken whiteness to a religion, a set of beliefs and practices, which give “white” people dominion over the entire earth. He notes the connection between this rise of whiteness, with material and symbolic privileges, and European colonization of “the darker regions of the world.” Though Du Bois was writing at a time in which overt white supremacy reigned, his insights into the racial structure of the modern world matters just as much today as it did in the 20th century.

Yet as scholars have noted, whiteness is often neglected in conversations on race and ethnicity (Lewis, 2004; McDermott & Sampson, 2005). Colorblind

ideology makes it particularly challenging to talk about race (Bonilla-Silva, 2006), and white fragility often forecloses opportunities to critically examine whiteness itself (DiAngelo, 2011). To my knowledge, in higher education, courses on whiteness are still rare, and when they are offered it isn't without controversy. Last spring, a Professor of English at Arizona State University received national attention and plenty of hate mail for teaching a course on "Race Theory and the Problem of Whiteness" (White, 2015). Moreover, a quick analysis of an American Sociological Association collection of syllabi on race and ethnicity, compiled in the late 1990s, revealed that sociologists had not incorporated the examination of whiteness into their pedagogy. Of the thirty-three syllabi examined, only 36% contained a segment dealing exclusively with whiteness as a structural relationship (ASA, 2015). At the same time, a more recent look at syllabi available on the Teaching Resources and Innovations Library for Sociology database, reveals that just over half (59%) of syllabi for courses taught between 2005-2015 on race and ethnicity included modules and readings on whiteness.¹

As the product of social construction, race is always relational and the history of racial formation is one in which racial categories are created, and maintained, in relation to others (Omi & Winant, 2014). Hence, we cannot really understand race in the U.S. without talking about whiteness and the construction of various "others" (Hughey, 2015). Consequently, our pedagogies of race and ethnicity in the modern world are incomplete without a thorough discussion of whiteness. At the same time, it is politically impossible to address racial inequity without making whiteness, and the symbolic and material privileges that come along with it, visible (McIntosh, 1990). In failing to incorporate examinations of whiteness in our classrooms, we unintentionally reproduce the very same structures that allow whiteness to go undisputed, thereby maintaining American sociology's "racially gendered classed" structures of knowledge (Padilla Wyse, 2014).

This article presents one means of exploring whiteness in the classroom using the *Whiteness Project*. Over the past three years, I've used the *Whiteness Project* within the context of courses on race and ethnicity, refining the method each time. Demographically, the classroom settings have been diverse, with students from a range of racial and ethnic backgrounds.² In brief, I utilize a mixture of lecture and discussion based on clips from the *Whiteness Project*, in an hour long session. Below I will present how I've used this project to teach whiteness, in hopes that other educators will make use of this powerful tool in their own pedagogy.

What is the *Whiteness Project*?

The *Whiteness Project* is an ongoing endeavor that is conducting interviews with white people across the country to document their relationships to, and their understandings of, their own whiteness. In his artistic statement about the project, director and producer Whitney Dow writes:

Most people take for granted that there is a “white” race in America, but rarely is the concept of whiteness itself investigated. What does it mean to be a “white”? Can it be genetically defined? Is it a cultural construct? A state of mind? How does one come to be deemed “white” in America and what privileges does being perceived as white bestow? The Whiteness Project is a multi-platform media project that examines both the concept of whiteness itself and how those who identify as “white” process their ethnic identity. The project’s goal is to engender debate about the role of whiteness in American society and encourage white Americans to become fully vested participants in the ongoing debate about the role of race in American society.³

The project centers around asking interviewees questions like, “What is it like to be white?” and “Do you believe that you’ve ever received any benefits from being white?” These are questions that white people aren’t used to being asked, but are vital to understanding race in the United States and beyond.

The first installment of the project, released in October of 2014, consisted of twenty-one interviews filmed in Buffalo, New York. A second installment was released in April of 2016, consisting of twenty-five interviews with millennials filmed in Dallas, Texas. Videos are presented on a simple interface, displaying a salient quote above a picture from each interview. Each video runs for less than two minutes. At the end of each short clip, data is presented on some interesting theme that touched upon in the interview. For example, at the end of one video in which the interviewee states that she doesn’t think that race poses a problem for anyone in contemporary America, “60% of white Americans say race relations are ‘generally good,’” is displayed at the end. The presentation of broader statistical data situates the perspectives of the interviewees within a broader socio-historical context.

Using the Whiteness Project in the Classroom

Teaching about race necessitates finding ways to talk about whiteness in contexts that are often hostile to that sort of critical engagement. As Woodall (2013) writes:

A variety of classroom problems are likely to occur, or be exacerbated, with the introduction of a pedagogy of whiteness. Some students fall silent while others dominate discussions. A number of rhetorical tools can be invoked to facilitate better class dialogues like using emotion-quelling examples and helping students find common ground with various oppressed groups. (p. 12)

In addition to using rhetorical tools like emotion-quelling questions, Woodall finds that sociology professors teaching about whiteness rely on materials like Peggy McIntosh's (1988) *White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack*. Also important to their pedagogies of whiteness were the order in which information was presented and attention to the demographic context of the classroom.

In my own teaching, I have found the *Whiteness Project* to be a particularly fruitful means of exploring whiteness by turning attention to the ways that interviewees talk about race, and more importantly, their own white social locations. I use these interviews to explore different aspects of whiteness related to the readings assigned for a given week. Before the clips are presented to the class, I begin with a brief lecture on why it is important to talk about whiteness when we talk about race. I then prime the conversation by presenting Bonilla-Silva's frames of colorblind racism—abstract liberalism, naturalization, cultural racism, and the minimization of racism—from *Racism without Racists* (Bonilla-Silva, 2006).⁴ I then play a clip from the project and ask students to identify which of these frames are articulated by the interviewee and how. This exercise allows students to see how colorblind racism, and its frames for understanding the racial order, operate within real people. After setting this stage, I ask students to keep those frames in mind as we move forward with the class session.

Below, I present two further examples of how I have used the project to talk about different aspects of whiteness in the contemporary social world. Each example is centered around a theme, or way in which whiteness manifests in the lives of people: colorblind whiteness and the possessive investment in whiteness. I proceed by reviewing important facets of each theme (as I do in the classroom),

presenting a paraphrased transcript of each video clip, followed by a discussion of how students have responded to the exercise.

Example 1: Colorblind Whiteness

The speakers in these two videos exemplify what I explain as “colorblind whiteness” in that they both acknowledge their own whiteness, but don’t see it as providing them with any privilege. They claim to see beyond race, also believing that there is no disadvantage to being nonwhite either. In this sense, their whiteness is a passive, or background, element in the formation of their identities. In our racialized society, the ability to have race operate as a background element in the construction of one’s identity is itself a privilege. For the most part, people of color have not historically, nor do they today, have the luxury of having race act in the background of their lives in social settings. At the same time, colorblindness creates an atmosphere of hostility when it comes to talking about racial inequality, in which discussions of race are somehow framed as racist (Bonilla-Silva, 2002). This blinds people from the ways in which race still matters in determining the life chances and experiences of nonwhites, thereby maintaining the racialized structure of inequality in the United States. Yet despite the prevalence of colorblind ideology, we know that even at the cognitive level implicit racial biases are still operational (Greenwald & Krieger, 2006).

1. Video title: “I have never come across anything that made me aware of my race.”

I don't really think I've ever come across anything that has made me aware of my race...Like I say I'm an American before I am anything else. Benefits of being white? You know I don't believe there is [sic] any benefits of anybody...how they grew up or their particular race or color. I feel like I've accomplished what I've accomplished in life because of the person that I am and not because color of my skin. I don't think there are any draw backs in being black either... people are people. The world needs to be more colorblind.

2. Video title: “I just don’t buy into the nonsense about discrimination.”

Your color means absolutely nothing to me. You're a human being, just like every human being, and I just don't buy into the nonsense about discrimination. I feel like everybody's equal, and that's the way it should be. I mean the fields I've worked with, whether you be black or Latino, if you

have it upstairs, and you really commit to do what you want to do with your life. I don't think that race has to do with anything. You know you're given your cards, and it's the way that you play them.

Students' responses to the clips. Students typically find these two clips humorous and tend to laugh a bit while viewing them. Since the module on whiteness typically happens deeper into the semester, students have already been exposed to the multitude of ways in which race matters in the modern world. More often than not, students note that they are familiar with this narrative, encountering it often in their daily lives.

I usually prepare one or two discussion questions that serve to get the conversation started. For these two clips I ask: How is it a privilege to have race operate as a background element in the construction of your sense of self? How might colorblind whiteness perpetuate racial inequalities? Often, students of color are the first to raise their hands, connecting the privilege of having race operate in the background to Du Bois' concept of double consciousness (Itzigsohn & Brown, 2015), having been introduced to the concept at the beginning of the course. White and non-white students both usually reflect upon the difficulties of bringing up issues of racial inequity amongst their white friends, and see this inability to recognize race privilege as an impediment to making any real progress. In my experience, all students regardless of their race or ethnicity, have little trouble identifying the ways in which these speakers minimize racism, relying on notions of abstract liberalism to do so (i.e. "...if you have it upstairs, and you really commit to do what you want to do with your life").

Example 2: Possessive Investment in Whiteness

The following *Whiteness Project* participants exemplify what George Lipsitz (2006) calls the possessive investment in whiteness. What Lipsitz seeks to invoke with the notion of "possessive investment" is the ways in which within our racialized society, people are encouraged to expend time and energy on the creation and re-creation of whiteness. For both of the men interviewed, whiteness is active, and stands at the fore of their identities. It is something that both men would rally around if called to do so collectively. Likewise, both speakers are invested in their being white in a way that links up with material resources and opportunities. After describing an alleged case of discrimination in hiring practices against white people, the man in the second clip states, "A lot of minorities should understand that a lot of white boys aren't going to be pushed around." There is a strong sense that these men feel like "minorities" are taking their (white) jobs.

1. Video title: "I felt cheated."

Well I guess I've kind of grown up to be proud of what I am and my race and what not. I see myself as having a lot more respect than a lot of these other races around the area, and how the young kids today are terrible. It's my honest opinion that today the white race is the one that is discriminated against anymore [sic]. I have taken exams to get into skilled trades fields, such as electrician, machine shop, machinist, and welding and all that, and scored well on the exams and stuff, but didn't get picked for the apprenticeship programs to get into those fields because minorities had to fill them because of quota status. So that's my own personal experience with that, which I felt cheated, and it wasn't fair. They took the same test I did and didn't score as well, but yet they might have been fifteen on the list when I was two on the list to go next, and got bypassed because minority requirement.

2. Video title: "A lot of white boys aren't going to be pushed around."

I don't know any people that aren't proud that they are white, not in my social group. They know they're white... I think affirmative action was nice. It had its time... I think the time is over with. We gonna keep this up for another hundred-and-fifty years? We gotta have so many Asians in the fire department and so on. The white guys will never have a chance to be a fireman or a cop anymore...A lot of minorities should understand that a lot of white boys aren't going to be pushed around. It seems that the younger generation of white males are a little bit more fearful of minorities. They don't want to step on anyone's toes everything has to be politically correct. I wasn't raised that way.

Students' responses to the clips. To get the conversation started after showing these clips, I usually ask students to think of specific historical examples of the possessive investment in whiteness within U.S. history. I have found that students respond positively to this question, citing numerous examples throughout history, from black people passing as white to the foreclosure of voting opportunities to nonwhite people enshrined in the constitution until 1870. If students have trouble thinking about the possessive investment in whiteness historically, I remind them that the Irish, for example, were not always considered white (Ignatiev, 2009). Their whiteness was something that they had to fight for.

Students also link the attitudes expressed in both of the videos to nativism and debates over immigration and border security, noting the ways that immigrants are talked about in the mainstream media. Students of color have shared their experiences of being told that they were only admitted to college because of affirmative action, which in turn made them feel unwelcome and out of place. They also recognize a sense of entitlement that comes with being white, noting how both men in the video clips claim that white people are more qualified than minorities competing for the same jobs. All students, white and nonwhite, easily identify undertones of cultural racism in these statements in their presumption that minorities just aren't as qualified.

Discussion

Overall, I have found that the *Whiteness Project* has facilitated classroom discussions by presenting the ways that white people think about race and their own whiteness. All students respond to the videos by trying to interpret the deeper meanings present in the statements made by *Whiteness Project* participants. By drawing upon their own experiences, students connect the worldviews and attitudes presented in the videos with their own lives, noting the ways that whiteness and non-whiteness shape their own everyday experiences. When asked whether the class session was helpful in furthering their understanding of whiteness and if so how, students responded in the affirmative:

Student 1: Yes, to see the many ways in which whiteness can be revealed as racist, whether overt or very hidden/not personally recognized. It was also helpful to hear from people and see how they actually interpret race and how those perceptions continue to influence our society.

Student 2: Yes—seeing the actual arguments people have—ignorance. Implicit bias—shown w/ actual people. Understanding the privilege + power in whiteness.

Student 3: Yes, to hear the theories of whiteness (and its supremacy) isn't the same as hearing how whiteness affects white people.

An alternative use might entail a student led investigation of whiteness using the *Whiteness Project*. Instead of predetermined themes, an instructor could ask students to view all videos on their own time, individually or in a group, and write a brief response highlighting the themes that they found most important. These

students' responses could then be used to motivate an in-depth classroom discussion. Clips from *The Whiteness Project* could also be incorporated into lectures, and interpreted by the instructor, in the case of large lecture-based classes. Of course, each instructor must use this tool in a way that fits their own pedagogical needs.

Conclusion

Whiteness often goes unexamined in our colorblind society and unfortunately this is also the case in our courses on race and ethnicity in sociology. In this article, I have argued that we need to find ways to teach about whiteness, if our pedagogies on race and ethnicity are to be robust. The *Whiteness Project* presents itself as one pedagogical tool, among others like Strmic-Pawl's (2015) White Supremacy Flower Model, which we as sociologists might rely on for teaching about whiteness. Using the interviews featured on the *Whiteness Project* website, opens up the opportunity for students to explore the phenomenology of whiteness, using the same interpretive analytic strategy that qualitative sociologists are trained to conduct. After all, the sociological imagination is most powerful when students begin to use it themselves.

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Endnotes

¹ TRAILS is a pedagogical resource for members of the American Sociological Association. "About TRAILS." 2016. *Teaching Resources and Innovations Library for Sociology*. Retrieved (<http://trails.asanet.org/Pages/TDLContent.aspx>).

² The number of students ranged between 25-40 for any given classroom session.

³ From www.whitenessproject.org

⁴ Bonilla-Silva (2006) argues that these are the most common, and overlapping, ideological frames that whites use to understand race in the modern world.

⁵ Feedback was asked for in written form. Of approximately twenty-five students present in the classroom on that day, I received ten feedback forms, all of which stated that the exercise was helpful.

