Interrogating Ourselves in a Racialized World: Using Personal Experience to Improve Students' Understanding of Racism

Kendra Jason[1] and Sarah Nell Epplen[2]

Abstract

In this article we suggest strategies for teachers who do not teach race and ethnicity courses on how to create learning opportunities for students to analyze their social environments and interrogate how their beliefs, feelings, and actions concerning race and racism are shaped by their social worlds. We propose a pedagogical approach that examines and welcomes students' personal experiences in the classroom as one of the most powerful tools for promoting deep learning about race relations and the damaging subtleties of racism. We argue that having students analyze the social origins of their thoughts by personalizing their assignments helps students identify the source of internalized colorblind ideologies. We contend that only when students are pushed to acknowledge the social sources of their "individual" perspectives will they be equipped to examine society through racialized lenses.

Lessons on race and racism are common in most humanities and social science courses, yet the challenges that instructors face when teaching students about race, racism, privilege, and inequality in "post-racial America" cannot be understated (Bonilla-Silva [2006] 2014; Haltinner 2014; Valiente-Neighbours 2015). Typically, white students are surrounded by "walls of whiteness" that protect them from challenges to white supremacy (Brunsma, Brown, and Placier 2013). When they are confronted with critical lessons about race and racism, white students often resist (Davis 1992). Some even create hostile classroom climates (Haddad and Lieberman 2002) as negative feelings (e.g., guilt, rage, denial) may arise (Gallagher 2003; Johnson 2005; Kleinman and Copp 2009; Macomber and Rusche 2010). Because they consider race insignificant, white students are often agitated by the emotions they experience when

racism is critically examined, frequently reacting defensively, as if they are exempt from critical dialogue about the causes and consequences of racism. Nonwhite students, on the other hand, may also resist, hoping to avoid feelings of shame, tokenism, and fear (Ferber and Stores 1995). Regardless of racial identity, most students have internalized post-racial rhetoric and individualistic explanations for racial inequalities (Khanna and Harris 2015; Kleinman and Copp 2009). Creating a

[1]University of North Carolina at Charlotte, Charlotte, NC, USA
[2]Minnesota State University, Mankato, MN, USA

Corresponding Author:
Kendra Jason, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, 9201 University City Blvd., Charlotte, NC 28223, USA.
Email: kjason@uncc.edu

space for critical dialogue by using pedagogical tools that allow students to process negative emotions concerning race will help students understand their attitudes and the related persistence of racial inequality (Bailey et al. 2015).

This paper has three goals. We encourage teachers to (1) interrogate the origins of our thoughts through critical self-reflection; (2) use students' experiences (captured through journaling) as data in the classroom; and (3) use these data to better understand the dynamics of race and racism, personally and structurally. We highlight research on the benefits of examining personal experience as sociological data and share our approach, which welcomes individuals' lived experiences and biases to the front of the conversation. Pedagogy using personal experience has been demonstrated as beneficial for student learning (Hironimus-Wendt and Wallace 2009; Hoop 2009; Mueller 2013; Picca, Starks, and Gunderson 2013). Our approach builds on this research, challenging students to examine the social sources of ideas and information. By specifically examining self, history, and data in this way, we can help students comprehensively evaluate knowledge claims and interpretations of reality—empirical or experiential.

INTERROGATING THE ORIGINS OF STUDENTS' THOUGHTS ON RACISM

We describe a process of interrogation that sees developing self-awareness, revealing invisible lessons on race, and constructing new mental models (Bain 2004:26) as necessary first steps for learning about race in a nondefensive way. These activities provide students the tools and guidance to begin interrogating the origins of their thoughts about racism.

Developing Self-awareness

As students develop self-awareness, they discover the interplay between their personal biographies and the broader sociohistorical context (Berger and Luckmann 1967; Hoop 2009; Mills 1959). Students learn to interpret the world in particular contexts that shape how they perceive various realities. Students take their worldviews for granted and struggle to consider how their interpretations of the world are socially constructed. Investing time unpacking those opinions and discovering their sources and their flaws (or truths) not only is useful educational practice but may allow students to make conclusions on their own and develop more

self-knowledge in the process (cf. Ghoshal et al. 2013; Mueller 2013).

Revealing Invisible Lessons

Students often have erroneous assumptions about race dynamics, ignoring or denying systems of racism and institutionalized privilege (Bonilla-Silva [2006] 2014; Gallagher 2003; Ghoshal et al. 2013; Johnson 2005; Kleinman and Copp 2009; Wellman 1993). By beginning with lessons that show how history books make systemic racism seem invisible (see Loewen [1995] 2007), we reveal that what we do *not* see, know, or think about race is shaped by narratives and perspectives that are left out (Collins 2000). These invisible lessons help explain why many students reject claims of racism—they have learned not to see it.

Constructing New Mental Models

In his acclaimed book, *What the Best College Teachers Do*, Bain (2004) argues that learners enter new learning environments with previously constructed mental models, or constructed paradigms. We cannot simply replace these models with new information; learners use existing knowledge to make sense of new material (Bain 2004:26–7). Students learn more deeply when given opportunities to grapple with the connections or contradictions between their existing paradigms and new information; without those, students may take a surface approach to learning (Bain 2004:27–8). When students draw on their personal experiences, they put old and new material into the proverbial ring, often constructing new mental models. They will see the personal relevance of race in their own lives, which will foster deeper understanding of race and racism (Roberts 2002).

SAMPLE EXERCISES: EXAMINING RACE THROUGH PERSONAL EXPERIENCES

The data for this paper are derived from analytic reflection exercises at two predominately white institutions that enroll primarily traditional-aged students: a large state university and a small private university in the Southeast. The proposed exercises are designed to help students relate course material with their personal experiences to discover the interplay of biography and society—a valuable lesson in any course and the key to developing a sociological imagination (Mills 1959).

Sample Assignment 1: Journal of Reflections and Questions (Lower-level Course)

Introduction to Sociology students at the state university kept a journal of reflections and questions throughout the semester. Reflection papers were designed to assess students' achievement of the course learning outcome: "Apply the sociological perspective and sociological knowledge to explain various aspects of social life." Journals were graded using a check/check system and were used primarily to keep students engaged with the readings. The assignment learning objectives are that students will (1) become engaged, critical readers through the practice of asking questions and reflecting upon reading material and (2) evaluate their own intellectual and sociological growth. There are three major components to this assignment: a reflective summary, question writing, and an analytic reflection paper. Students are to write a brief summary of each reading using critical thinking skills and then pose a question inspired by the reading (see Rusche and Jason 2011 for examples). Over the semester students organize and share their summaries and questions with each other, and then at the end of the semester, they write an analytic reflection paper (see the appendix for full assignment directions).

Sample Assignment 2: Family Research Paper (Upper-level Course)

Students in an upper-level Contemporary Families course at the private university wrote family research papers. This project, adapted from Warren (2009), required students to interview family members to identify and examine sociological concepts learned in the course. Interviewing family members enables students to identify which aspects of sociology are most relevant to their families and how their family experiences have been shaped by the social world. While students were not specifically directed to write on topics of race, many students identified race as an important theme in their family's biography. Identifying this without a prompt suggests that students relied on course material and readings, which helped them achieve an important learning outcome of the course: "To examine how race, class, and gender shape family life." The assignment learning objectives are for students to (1) fully appreciate the connection between biography and history and between the self and society; (2) combine the use of sociological research methods and historical and sociological perspectives; and (3) contribute to the understanding of how families shape and are shaped by social circumstances. For this assignment, students write a paper using interviews they have completed with family members to identify and examine sociological concepts learned in the course (see the appendix for full directions).

LEARNING OUTCOMES EXPLORED

We used a combination of reading materials, critical reflection journals, and critical dialogue to examine students' experiences concerning race. Using simple coding exercises derived from grounded theory methods (Charmaz 2006), we created conceptual codes to interpret the data. Eight race-themed learning outcomes emerged from about half of the white students' reflective writing in these exercises:

- Acknowledge white supremacy
- Identify white privilege
- Distinguish between individual racism and institutional racism
- Interrogate racial history
- Identify hegemonic racist ideologies
- Grapple with consequences of racism
- Identify how race shapes everyday life
- Shift race-related mental models

To achieve these learning outcomes, we helped students understand race and racism by requiring them to challenge what they already "knew" and providing them with strategies to deal with unsettling emotions. By incorporating students' personal experiences into content about race and privilege, "students learn to connect their racial memories to broader patterns of racial inequality" (for illustrations of how white and nonwhite students experience these processes differently through writing, see Macomber and Rusche 2010:214). As this student's entry illustrates, feelings are an important part of learning that can be used to shift mental models:

> Towards the beginning [of class] I mostly wrote about the amount I agreed or disagreed with the article instead of actually thinking about how it made me feel. As the semester went on, I began sharing how the concepts applied to my life. . . . [This] really helped me fully understand what was being taught.

This student shows that sharing opinions was a good place to begin engagement with material that

may challenge existing mental models. Requiring students to interrogate—and eventually come to terms with—their participation in larger systems of domination, such as racism, is powerful (Johnson 2005; Mueller 2013):

> Now I understand that racism has its roots that are embedded into people's lives without them knowing it, and I also understand that though I may not think that I act racist, I still am just because of my family's past.

By interrogating racial history, identifying white privilege, and grappling with the consequences of racism, this student is beginning to understand that examining the structural nature of racism is not meant to attack white individuals or to inspire guilt. As the student acknowledged the influence of ideology on how she previously understood her social position, the sociological became personal and vice versa.

In addition to gaining important sociological knowledge, students develop self-knowledge as they learn to view their personal experiences through a sociological lens. These exercises have broad implications beyond race; this student identifies this key benefit of reflective writing:

> I can honestly say this class and these journals [have] given me a lot of insight to who I am as well as to the problems of the world, most of which I thought to be non-existent.

This student, like others, learned to interrogate prior schemas alongside newfound sociological knowledge. He discovered how identifying hegemonic racist ideology benefits the privileged as he gained self-knowledge of his own obliviousness.

Not all students were as eager to examine how their upbringing shaped their worldviews. This student admits a reluctance to think critically about her family when asked to do a family research paper:

> Before this research project and this class, I would have found it very difficult to assess my family sociologically because they are just that: my family. Now, however, I understand the complexity of such an assessment and the emotions that are inextricably implicated in such a study. It is with this understanding that I have been able to see the sociological elements [of race] at play in my own family dynamic. My parents are a product of [their social environments] and I am a product of their experiences.

This student's sociological journey into her family's past was, at first, unnerving because she had to confront uncomfortable emotions as she recognized her own white privilege and identified racist attitudes and behavior in her family. This process allowed her to begin shifting her previously constructed mental model. Other students expressed similar difficulty examining something so close, so sacred. Personal experience was viewed as "off limits" for academic inquiry. In the quotation below, the student references an excerpt from Michael Schwalbe's (2008) introductory reader, *The Sociologically Examined Life*. The quote indicates the importance of creating opportunities for students to interrogate the origins of their perspectives:

> As Schwalbe [2008] asserts, . . . "we experience the realness of the threads only when we try to pull them apart." I often found it difficult to come up with examples of sociological concepts relating to my family in class, and this is probably because I never really tried to pull them apart until I was asked to do so. From analyzing these themes, I have been able to further understand my family as a whole and how I have adopted views from my parents.

Aptly quoting Schwalbe, this student identifies a key point: Pulling apart the threads of reality allows us to see what we could not see before. Students can gain a tremendous amount of sociological insight and self-knowledge if they are compelled to explore their personal lives through a sociological lens.

By welcoming the personal as sociological, "we are telling students that their experiences are not only personally meaningful, but also worthy of wider consideration" (Macomber and Rusche 2010:217). Students learn that their personal experiences are not so personal after all; they are patterned in meaningful ways. Rather than relying on impersonal facts about residential segregation and institutional discrimination, for example, we guide students to these conclusions, which equip them to think critically about other aspects of their lives. In this way, students create and develop knowledge about the social world and about themselves within it, as evidenced below:

> I am now educated and prepared enough to confront problems in our world [related to racism], and perhaps I can attempt to fix them, or at least not contribute to them. A lot of this awareness came from the critical writing journals, an excellent example of my growth as a sociology student.

As students develop critical self-knowledge, they learn to value their ability to engage in open dialogue where they can evaluate knowledge and, as this student suggests, recognize how they may contribute to social problems like racism and begin to work toward social justice.

CONCLUSION

In this paper we encouraged teachers to use critical self-reflection and students' experiences as data in the classroom, guiding students to interrogate the origins of their thoughts. Developing such self-knowledge allows them to see how racism, as well as other systemic realities, and their personal lives are intertwined. We have provided ways to create a space (through writing) to explore sociological questions that will cultivate self-knowledge for this interrogation. We have found these exercises and teaching approach to be effective in various institutions including predominately white institutions, historically black colleges and universities, and community colleges (Rusche and Jason 2011), so we advocate that these exercises will be helpful not only for white students but for all students. Students' critical self-reflection and sociological inquiries into their lived experiences provide rich, valuable data to use for sociological investigations into their own perspectives about and participation in racism. Welcoming the personal is not only valuable—it is necessary for students to contextualize sociological self-knowledge within a racialized world. We hope to inspire and enhance our students' intellectual development beyond our classroom. As students come to understand themselves vis-à-vis the social world, they may feel more equipped to work toward racial justice.

APPENDIX

Sample Assignment 1: Journal of Reflections and Questions (Lower-level Course)

Reflection papers are designed to assess students' learning and are graded using a check/check system. Reflection journals are used primarily to keep students engaged with the readings. Following are the assignment's major components:

Assignment learning objectives. Students will (1) become engaged, critical readers through the practice of asking questions and reflecting upon reading material and (2) evaluate their own intellectual and sociological growth.

Assignment directions

Step 1: Reflective Summary—Students write a brief summary of each reading, reflecting upon what the readings mean, argue, or point to, rather than simply stating the main points. This will require some synthesis, analysis, and critical thinking.

Step 2: Question—Students pose question(s) that provoke deeper thinking about the content and/or argument presented. Example: Sociologist Michael Schwalbe argues that the idea of "reverse racism" is a "false parallel" (2008:226). How can I recognize the difference between real racism and false parallels? (see also Rusche and Jason 2011).

Step 3: Organize and Share—Students compile graded summaries and questions in a date-ordered folder. Periodically, folders are swapped in class and used to spur discussion.

Step 4: Analytic Reflection Paper—At the end of the semester, students examine their semester-long journals, exploring their learning process and detailing any sociological revelations they experienced (e.g., recognizing white privilege). The guidelines for this type of reflective exercise are simple and customizable to your material. Teachers can choose to ask students to keep a collection of questions, main ideas, or quotes—whichever teachers determine most effective.

Sample Assignment 2: Family Research Paper (Upper-level Course)

This project requires students to interview family members to identify and examine sociological concepts learned in the course. Interviewing family members enables students to identify which aspects of sociology are most relevant to their families and how their family experiences have been shaped by the social world.

Assignment learning objectives. Students will (1) fully appreciate the connection between biography and history and between the self and society; (2) combine the use of sociological research methods and historical and sociological perspectives; and (3) contribute to the understanding of how families shape and are shaped by social circumstances.

Assignment directions. Read portions of Schwalbe's (2008) *The Sociologically Examined Life*, Risman's (2010) *Families as They Really Are*, and Lareau's (2011) *Unequal Childhoods*. Students choose to focus on three main content areas

from the course (e.g., division of household labor, romantic relationships, and approaches to child rearing) in weekly reflection summaries (see Sample Assignment 1, Step 1). Students then interview two to four family members to identify and examine sociological concepts learned in the course. Finally, students write a paper using interview data to illustrate the course concepts they chose.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

REFERENCES

Bain, Ken. 2004. *What the Best College Teachers Do*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Bailey, Amy, Jason Leiker, Andrew Gutierrez, Eric. Larson, and Serena Mitchell. 2015. "Memorializing Lynch Victims: Countering Colorblind Ideologies with Experiential Learning." *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity* 1(3):454–9.

Berger, Peter and Thomas Luckmann. 1967. *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor.

Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo. [2006] 2014. *Racism without Racists: Color-blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.

Brunsma, David, Eric Brown, and Peggy Pacier. 2013. "Teaching Race at Historically White Colleges and Universities: Identifying and Dismantling the Walls of Whiteness." *Critical Sociology* 39(5):717–38.

Charmaz, Kathy. 2006. *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide Through Qualitative Analysis*. London: Sage.

Collins, Patricia Hill. 2000. *Black Feminist Thought*. New York: Routledge.

Davis, Nancy. 1992. "Teaching about Inequality: Student Resistance, Paralysis, and Rage." *Teaching Sociology* 20(3):232–8.

Ferber, Abby L. and Debbie Storrs. 1995. "Race and Representation: Students of Color in the Multicultural Classroom." Pp. 32–47 in *Teaching a "New Canon"?: Students, Teachers, and Texts in the College Literature Classroom*, edited by Goebel B. A. Goebel and J. C. Hall. National Council of Teachers of English.

Gallagher, Charles A. 2003. "Colorblind Privilege: The Social and Political Functions of Erasing the Color Line in Post-race America." *Race, Gender & Class* 10(4):22–37.

Ghoshal, Raj Andrew, Cameron D. Lippard, Vanesa Ribas, and Kenneth Muir. 2013. "Beyond Bigotry: Teaching about Unconscious Prejudice." *Teaching Sociology* 41(2):130–43.

Haddad, Angela T. and Leonard Lieberman. 2002. "From Student Resistance to Embracing the Sociological Imagination: Unmasking Privilege, Social Conventions, and Racism." *Teaching Sociology* 30(3):328–41.

Haltinner, Kristin. 2014. "Introduction: Challenges and Opportunities in Teaching about Race and Antiracism in the Twenty-first Century." Pp. 1–7 in *Teaching Race and Anti-racism in Contemporary America: Adding Context to Colorblindness*, edited by K. Haltinner. New York: Springer.

Hironimus-Wendt, Robert J. and Lora Ebert Wallace. 2009. "The Sociological Imagination and Social Responsibility." *Teaching Sociology* 37(1):76–88.

Hoop, Katrina C. 2009. "Students' Lived Experiences as Text in Teaching the Sociological Imagination." *Teaching Sociology* 37(1):47–60.

Johnson, Allan G. 2005. *Privilege, Power and Difference*. 2nd ed. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Khanna, Nikki and Cherise A. Harris. 2015. "Discovering Race in a 'Post-racial' World: Teaching Race through Primetime Television." *Teaching Sociology* 43(1): 39–45.

Kleinman, Sherryl and Martha Copp. 2009. "Denying Social Harm: Students' Resistance to Lessons about Inequality." *Teaching Sociology* 37(3):283–93.

Lareau, Annette. 2005. *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Loewen, James. [1995] 2007. *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Macomber, Kris and Sarah Nell Rusche. 2010. "Using Students' Racial Memories to Teach about Racial Inequality." *Feminist Teacher* 20(3):214–25.

Mills, C. Wright. 1959. *The Sociological Imagination*. London: Oxford University Press.

Mueller, Jennifer C. 2013. "Tracing Family, Teaching Race: Critical Race Pedagogy in the Millennial Sociology Classroom." *Teaching Sociology* 41(2):172–87.

Picca, Laura, Brian Starks, and J. Gunderson. 2013. "'I Had No Idea It Related to Me!': Using Student Journal Writing to Make Visible Race, Class, and Gender in Everyday Life." *Teaching Sociology* 41(1):82–93.

Risman, Barbara, ed. 2010. *Families as They Really Are*. New York: W.W. Norton.

Roberts, Keith. 2002. "Ironies of Effective Teaching: Deep Structure Learning and Constructions of the Classroom." *Teaching Sociology* 30(1):1–25.

Rusche, Sarah Nell and Kendra Jason. 2011. "You Have to Absorb Yourself in It: Using Inquiry and

Reflection to Promote Student Learning and Self-knowledge." *Teaching Sociology* 38(4):338–53.

Schwalbe, Michael. 2008. *The Sociologically Examined Life: Pieces of the Conversation*. 4th edition. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Valiente-Neighbours, Jimiliz M. 2015. "Beyond "Post-race Paralysis": Creating Critical Dialogue on Race in the Obama Era." *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity* 1(2):331–5.

Warren, Mark. 2009. "Family History Research Project." Pp. 225–7 in *Sociology through Active Learning*, edited by K. McKinney and B. S. Heyl. Los Angeles: Pine Forge Press.

Wellman, David T. 1993. *Portraits of White Racism*. 2nd ed. New York: Cambridge University Press.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Kendra Jason is an assistant professor of sociology at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. Her primary research interests are social inequalities, work and social mobility, and aging and health disparities. She also specializes in critical pedagogy and learning outcomes. Her research involving the scholarship of teaching and learning can be found in *Teaching Sociology*. Her current research addresses the effects of multiple chronic conditions on workforce transitions of older Black workers and the mentorship experiences and professional development of early-career Black female faculty.

Sarah Epplen (previously Rusche) is an assistant professor of sociology at Minnesota State University, Mankato where she coordinates the teaching sociology internship program for sociology graduate students. Her primary research interests include social inequalities, identities, and the scholarship of teaching and learning, which she has published in Teaching Sociology and Feminist Teacher. Her current research identifies the benefits and challenges of team-based learning in large Introduction to Sociology courses.