Examining Race & Racism in the University: A Class Project

by Lora E. Vess

PROTEST AGAINST POLICE BRUTALITY IN BERKELEY, CALIFORNIA, 2014 (IMAGE: ANNETTE BERNHARDT)
By the end of 2014, most Americans were familiar with the Ferguson, Missouri shooting of an unarmed black teen, Michael Brown, and the Grand Jury acquittal of police officer, Darren Wilson. The shooting and subsequent deaths (Eric Garner, Walter Scott, Freddie Gray and others) raised black consciousness through “Black Lives Matter” protests and a public discourse on race, privilege, and discrimination that dominated the headlines for months and seemed to finally bring sustained attention to institutional racism, at least as manifest within law enforcement. To this extent, concerned citizens of all races began having long overdue conversations on race relations and racial disconnect in U.S. society. As a sociologist, while I regularly teach on these issues, I was inspired by the movement’s energy to find new ways to engage directly with race and privilege at my university. I did this by developing a student research project for a 400-level Race and Ethnicity class in which students conducted face-to-face in-depth interviews with members of the university community. By documenting experiences, our objective was to contribute to a better understanding of racial identity and racialized experiences on the university campus. On a pedagogical level, I had two goals: 1) for students to become active, experiential learners on the subject of race in their own lives and on campus, and 2) for students to learn and apply basic qualitative research skills.

Preventing for the Project

The Race and Ethnicity course is a 400-level, interactive seminar style course emphasizing critical thinking and experiential learning. Introduction to Sociology is a pre-requisite for the course. Similar courses incorporate activities designed to introduce students to the concept of race as a social construction (Obach 1999; Khanna and Harris 2009), as a mechanism for overcoming student resistance to learning about inequality (Pence and Fields 1999; Cherry et al. 2014), or to teach critical race theory in largely white classrooms and white institutions (Chaisson 2004). Still others emphasize the importance of interrogating one’s own position of power as white (Thomas 2007) and privileged (Messner 2011). Indigenous scholars (Brayboy 2005; Barnhardt and Kawagley 2005; Roberston 2015) problematize Westernized ways of knowing that perpetuate the ideology of colorblind objectivity and fail to attend to the endemic racism of colonization.

In our course, confronting white denial or white privilege as a potential barrier encountered in many race-critical courses was minimized by students’ racial diversity, the small class size, and the self-selection of white students into the course (one of whom is from a mixed-race family). Six students (all women) completed the Race and Ethnicity course, identifying as Asian, white, Filipina, Alaska Native, and Hispanic. All but one student had previously taken sociology classes with me where they learn that racial categories are historically and socially defined. Our approach was intersectional, yet the question guiding many of our readings and discussions was: how
To transition students from a safe classroom environment to uncomfortable or potentially confrontational encounters of investigation, I incorporated two specific assignments to help them prepare for their final project. The first assignment required students to interview individuals on questions related to racial identity and racial construction. Interviewees are asked to identify the current number and categories of races globally, and to explain the basis of their distinctions. Responses range from ‘one’ to ‘infinite’ with significant muddling of ethnicity, religion, race, and nationality. With comments from interviewees like “race shouldn’t matter” or “I don’t see a need for distinctions,” students learn just how uncomfortable and confused people are talking about race and how easily they may slip into “all” lives matter rhetoric. It is an eye-opening experience that provides students with useful interviewing practice and insight into the variability of racial constructions. As one student said, “finding out that a lot of people don’t even understand the concept [of race] was pretty surprising.”

In the second exercise, students led a discussion of Robin DiAngelo’s (2011) article “White Fragility,” which she describes as “a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves” including “the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation” (2011:54). Approximately fifteen faculty, staff, and administrators attended the forum. The small size felt manageable and reduced student anxiety. Students brought questions and passages to stimulate discussion of the reading, and attendees were encouraged to do the same. During the first week of the term, students developed a list of ground rules for facilitating safe and inclusive discussions. Nevertheless, we were unprepared for the actual display of white fragility that occurred by an older, white, male university professor when he refused to acknowledge racism or privilege because he had not seen it. Reflecting DiAngelo’s description of whites’ entitlement to racial comfort, he acknowledged that some of his students had reported experience with racism to him, but he denied the legitimacy of their accounts. Instead, he cautioned that by talking about “color,” we created stereotypes, rather than dismantled them. In our debriefing session, students were astonished that a university professor would interrupt them, talk over them, and freely demonstrate such problematic racial attitudes and white arrogance. In fact, one student suspected he had been a “plant” until she realized that I was also flustered. From my perspective what was most remarkable was not the display of white fragility and denial, but the well-articulated student challenge to his “defensiveness and righteous indignation” through his embodiment of the very characteristics of privilege that DiAngelo described.

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Conducting Qualitative Student Research in a Classroom Setting

Students in the social science and liberal arts programs at the University of Southeast Alaska have limited instruction in qualitative research, given the small size and quantitative methodological strengths of our faculty. As the only on-site sociologist, and one of only a few qualitative researchers, my goal is to increase student familiarity and experience in a range of qualitative methodological traditions. To this end, my courses incorporate projects involving in-depth interviewing and participant observation, skills that are useful in a variety of professions and help students learn to notice and listen for different experiences. Generally these are individual projects, rather than collective efforts. Thus, the students and I entered into this group-based project as novices together.

The first step in the project required students to complete human subjects training, with certificates indicating they passed the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative program. Our research process deviated from a standard format in that we did not conduct a literature review; instead we relied on our classroom readings and lectures to become familiar with relevant material. We were motivated by a desire to better understand racial dynamics and interactions, rather than to add to the sociological literature per se. While I would not endorse skipping this step for most other course projects, it was an important time saver. Students preferred a community-based project that would allow them to investigate police interactions, incarceration, and housing discrimination, but the scope was too large and I advocated a campus-based project instead. Next, students developed a list of possible interview questions, partly based off of their first assignment. We attempted to narrow this list (students initially submitted over 50 questions) during class time, by prioritizing the most salient questions and rewriting those with ambiguous intent. Nevertheless,
we ran out of time and I spent a long weekend consolidating the questions, taking significant care not to omit questions or change the nature of the students’ ideas. I also took responsibility for writing and submitting our institutional review board application. Students were required to read and provide feedback to the IRB application, but very few changes were recommended. This limited student role was not ideal, but necessary, if I did not want to divert too much student time (inside or outside the classroom) away from the substantive course material. Finally, having developed a clear, if not lengthy, interview guide, we dedicated a class period to practice interviews with subsequent revision based on student input. It was important that students felt invested in the project with a degree of ownership over the research design. At times I may have been autocratic in decision-making, but in general this was to ensure strong ethical standards, coordination, and efficiency. When I made decisions without students, I did my best to explain my decisions and obtain their buy-in.

Considerable classroom time was dedicated to the ethical dimensions of interviewing members of such a small campus community and the importance of protecting identities. Interviewees understood participation was voluntary and provided informed consent, yet the class agreed that potential risks to faculty, staff, and students who shared experiences and observations of racism were high and took numerous steps to prevent identification. We were adamant that no identifying characteristics would be revealed during our final presentation. Names were never shared in the classroom setting. We used pseudonyms (selected by the interviewee), neutral pronouns such as “they” rather than “he” or “she” in our class discussions and presentation, and never linked identifiable information such as position and race in public discussion. Only individual student interviewers and I had access to interview notes and consent forms. Our demographic data collection was limited to racial identification, age range, department (not major, since we were interviewing both students and staff), and gender identity. Regardless of our efforts, it was clear that some interviewees remained apprehensive about disclosing too much, as indicated by comments like, “I can’t say that” or “That will expose my identity.” Students did not audio-record the interviews, a possible validity concern, but this decision strengthened identity protection and saved time.

The interviews were used to expand student methodological capabilities and promote active learning. In-depth interviews give voice to experiences and are especially useful for small populations. The informal interviews and the “White Fragility” forum provided students with key basic interviewing skills and insight into challenges of race-centric discussions. Students learned recruitment strategies, ethical guidelines, probing techniques, and questionnaire construction, and gained formal research presentation experience. Applying course concepts and student research interests, we developed four general categories of inquiry: 1) understandings of race, 2) racialized experiences on campus, 3) race-related observations on campus, and 4) recommendations for improving race relations and diversity on campus.

Open-ended questions helped us avoid making presumptions about interviewee experiences and also avoid construction of multiple questionnaire designs that focused on one race over another (i.e. questions about white privilege). We minimized sociological terminology (colorblindness, invisibility, microaggressions) in our interviews, instead using words we felt had commonly understood definitions (stereotyping, diversity, racism), even if sociologists may define those terms in particular ways distinct from lay use. This allowed students to see first-hand that although most everyone presumes to know what “race” is, most cannot comfortably or confidently define it. The prevalence of this disjuncture was actually one of the major findings of the study. However, by leaving interpretation of key terms open, we may have threatened validity since some interviewees did not answer questions as we intended (e.g., believing “reverse racism” is a problem).

In their reflection papers, students described a combination of interviewing anxiety and excitement, with nervousness diminishing after each completed interview. Students were required to conduct a minimum of five interviews, with one student conducting twelve because, “after interviewing five people I realized I was starting to see patterns...and I wanted to know more.” Given deeply entrenched conceptions of race, we did not attempt to “correct” interviewees’ misconceptions of racial construction. Students learned to play the role of the neutral interviewer and minimize bias, both in regards to respondents seeking approval and by not interjecting. This was challenging for students, with several stating that it was difficult “to not jump in and point out racist dialogue, racially coded language, and blatantly racist comments.” In one student’s words,

It was hard to sit there in situations when you had participants choking up telling stories and you just had to sit there showing little emotion, or you had participants who were pissed off about a race receiving benefits and then it was difficult to tell them not to shove it.

Discussion of Research Experience

On key experiential learning measures—connecting sociological concepts to reality, validating student experiences, and educating others—the project was a success. As one student described,

The highlight of this project was conducting the actual interviews and actually seeing people think about their experiences with race on campus. Several of the people I interviewed had to stop and think about it for a while and I felt like because they were doing that, our class was actually making an impact on getting a dialogue started on about this issue. Hearing their answers reinforced sociological concepts...

As others (Wright 2000; Pedersen 2011; Strangfeld 2013) have noted, active student-led learning creates a
Listening to other people’s stories made me feel better about my own. I’m sure it was a relief for some of our interviewees to get those stories off their chests and I’m glad we gave them the chance to.

Several students referenced the emotional aspects of the project with one student observing, “The conflict and/or personal experiences heated the conversations, which is needed before progress can be addressed.”

By conducting research within an institution familiar to students, the interviews had the combined effect of personalizing experiences of privilege in a known setting and exposing institutionalized structures of privilege and denial, which are frequently hidden from view as students go about their daily lives on campus. As students learned, few people talk about race or racial identity, but given the opportunity, both the interviewee and interviewer often experienced transformative moments. For example,

I found it most interesting that people I consider friends had this moment of realizing that all the jokes people make toward them about their race and/or ethnicity really aren’t funny. I had a friend tell me that in actuality it “pisses me off.” I’ve never seen that side of him and honestly I was happy to.

Another student stated:

I thought it was revealing that white interviewees picked up on examples of racism/racially coded language among friends and others, but not in themselves. In one case, a white interviewee denounced seeing examples of racism/discrimination on campus, yet laughed and told a racist joke about Alaska Natives and asked that I keep it off record.

Gaining insight into university organization and functioning lifted a veil of colorblindness and supposed racial equity. Black scholars have advanced concerns that recruitment failures and challenges to promotion have kept faculty of color underrepresented in higher education. Our findings clearly indicated student concern about the lack of racial diversity among faculty. As one student stated,

I had one interviewee, who was a person of color, that (sic) said when it comes to faculty meetings conducted specifically for addressing diversity issues, there were still people who showed up questioning the need for diversity, when it is blatantly obvious that there is a lack of it within faculty and staff members.

Another student observed,

One of the people I was interviewing said something along the lines of, “to white people nothing is about race; to people of color, everything is about race,” and I think that especially after seeing all the data, this is somewhat true on our campus. People belonging to minority groups do have the burden of being a “person of color,” whether it’s being a target of micro-aggressions or being singled-out on campus.

Integration of Black Lives Matters struggles into the class provided a model of activism and inclusivity to refer to, fostering understandings of the power of transformative dialogue and action.

Black Lives Matter has helped revive student anti-racism activism on university campuses. While it was not my goal to “create” activists per se, I did want students to feel empowered as they articulated forms of racial marginalization on campus. Through the research experience, students were able to connect race scholarship with social justice. Integration of Black Lives Matters struggles into the class provided a model of activism and inclusivity to refer to, fostering understandings of the power of transformative dialogue and action. One of our main objectives was to contribute to the campus dialogue on race, particularly through our end of the term presentation attended by fellow students, faculty, staff, and several administrators. Students presented the key findings of their project, using PowerPoint slides for quantitative data, while reading selected quotes from interviews. Even though students felt apprehensive about the presentation and were a bit self-critical, the opportunity to share these findings was meaningful to both the students and the campus community. This project provides a baseline of data from which to act, including interviewee recommendations ranging from the general “more transparency” and “curricular changes” to the specific, “hold trainings during new student orientation” and “identify who to report a racially-discriminatory incident to” (the majority of our respondents had no idea whom to report to). Our analysis also revealed contradictory perceptions regarding the on-campus Native community, with some interviewees stressing that the university needs to do more with recruitment and retention, and several mixed raced respondents expressing feelings of exclusion from the Native community.

Post-Project Reflection

During my on-campus job interview, a (future) colleague drove me through our snowy campus, situated on Auke Lake, or Áak’w in Tlingit, with a view of Mendenhall Glacier and said, “Welcome to our summer camp.” While she was referring to the wooden structures, the size of the university, and the physical beauty, that introduction also implied a sense of intimacy. At the
University of Southeast Alaska (UAS), students call you by your first name and, as in other small towns, they are your servers in restaurants and your companions on the bus. The social distancing that occurs in other settings isn’t possible at UAS and in Juneau. Nevertheless, my whiteness and status as a professor affords me a privilege of legitimacy and power I can draw on when I wish to. I laughed with my students at DiAngelo’s description of the discomfort white people experience when people of color join together, even briefly, to the exclusion of whites in an anti-racism exercise. Upon later reflection, I wondered, “was I playing the role of the liberal progressive?” or, as Messner (2011) reflects, reinforcing my own privilege by appearing “so open-minded?” I am aware, as Thomas (2007) describes, that “being cool is not enough” and that so long as there is “the ever-present reality of racial oppression,” the relationship between the white teacher and non-white students will be problematic (p. 154). Cognizant of the normativity and invisibility of whiteness and the status my race affords me, I wanted to “name it” and on the first day I introduced myself to the students as a white person. I wondered about their responses; a sort of “d’uh” or “white professors don’t do that,” but this was an easy and even privileged action for me. I did not fear any challenges to my intellectual authority and legitimacy on that first day nor did I experience them at any point throughout the term (see Harlow 2003). Nevertheless, I am not a race scholar; race and ethnic relations was not one of my graduate areas of study, and while my position as the lone on-campus sociologist requires that I teach a range of new courses, teaching this particular class demands a greater sense of accountability and attention to systems of dominance and oppression that benefit me.

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I am also a feminist and come from a lower socio-economic status. At times I struggle with the imposter syndrome and engage in emotion work in ways that I doubt most of my male peers do. Yet, I have tried to be conscious of my privilege as a white, heterosexual, (yet untenured) university professor. In this class, I did not pretend to be “objective” about social inequalities and I imagine that it worked to my advantage to be female in a class of all women. Nevertheless, my race dominates among faculty, including all of us in social science. My race shapes my pedagogy, reinforcing the dominant white culture in ways I don’t always see or acknowledge (see Hytten and Adkins 2001). This project received nothing but positive feedback from colleagues. I do not know how this response may have differed had I been a woman of color. When interviewees were asked, “Who do you think is doing the most to address these issues?” the general response was that it is a small group of people on campus. For years, the few Native professors and staff have critiqued the western colonial model of the university and structural institutionalized limitations to racial diversity and retention. Those of us who wish to serve as allies need to continue doing “self work” and move beyond acknowledging our privileges to taking responsibility for institutional change. Even though our project was university-centered, we could have more strongly linked the structural racism at our institution with systematic problems found in higher education, particularly those noted by Black Lives Matter activists within academia, including educational attainment levels, curriculum changes, and cost constraints of higher education.

Reflecting upon implementation of the project, the students and I shared many of the same practical concerns. Not surprisingly, time limitations and time management are among the primary challenges for a project like this. Realistically, unless the project is conducted in a methods course, instructors must be prepared to take on a substantial part of the work. Thus, there was a trade-off between keeping the project on track and on schedule, and making sure the student research experience was solid. From the beginning of the term I told students I wanted this to be a collaborative project. Success on this front is uncertain; students reported that while the workload was evenly distributed, this was less of a “group project, but . . . a collaboration of several individual projects,” with at least one student valuing this approach because it made “us hold our own weight as students and [held] us accountable.” Students felt guidance was strong, but expressed preference for more time for interviews, discussion of data, and presentation preparation. Unfortunately, the student role in data analysis and compilation was limited. In hindsight, I should have assigned readings (e.g. Healey-Etten and Sharp 2010) to guide our class discussions on conducting interviews and developing the interview guide. I also underestimated student nervousness in speaking to an audience. While I felt students were prepared for the formal presentation, I now recognize I should have scheduled more practice time. A final consideration is the importance of trust and respect in the classroom; on the whole, this project would not have succeeded without a strong level of trust and accountability among students and between the students and me.

Conclusion: How Does Race Still Matter?

By the end of the term, students in the Race and Ethnicity class had not only learned that race still matters, but through their class project they had learned how it still matters to members of their campus community. This was especially relevant for understanding Native Alaskan identity and racism towards Alaska Natives on campus. Many Alaska Native interviewees expressed Native pride, with one interviewee stating, “I’m privileged to be indigenous to this place.” On the flipside, another Native interviewee stated, “It [lack of racial diversity on campus] affects me because it has often made me feel like a lone voice shrieking in the wilderness. It has frustrated me, Alienated me, angered me,” with another reporting, “I have been the object of micro-aggressions many times.” Non-
Native interviewees were found to be both supportive and resentful towards Native Alaskans on campus. A white interviewee describing stigma stated, “academically, professors see me differently because I am white. If I was Native, they wouldn’t think I was as motivated,” but more interviewees reported experiences or observations of “reverse racism” and at least one person thought only certain groups were allowed to practice their traditions on campus and found this “unfair.”

While this project was inspired by Black Lives Matter, the small proportion of African Americans on campus meant that our findings were not directly related to the primary grievances expressed by the movement such as state sanctioned violence against black bodies, black liberation, and investment in black communities. However, several self-identified mixed race and black men reported their unease with a new police substation on campus. One respondent stated, “I think that to get a campus cop now is really damn disrespectful . . . I know when me and my roommate were getting signatures to try to do something about the cop, only people who would sign it was brown kids. Other people were like, this is a good idea; it makes me feel safe.” Rarely is an officer on campus, yet this comment suggests that the movement may be influencing students who feel targeted by policing to call these things out. Some respondents remarked on the intertwined sexism and homophobia they had experienced or observed, unintentionally reflecting the queer feminism at the heart of the movement. One student’s comments highlighted the importance of black love at the center of Alicia Garza’s Facebook post credited with coining “Black Lives Matter”; “It [blackness] gets pushed under the rug. Like you should be embarrassed or should hide it, pretend to be a higher race, or whatever . . . My culture has been erased and forgotten.”

All of the students indicated interest in presenting the findings again, with several wanting to expand the scope of the project to include gender and sexual orientation. Now proficient in recognizing colorblind ideology, racially-coded language, and microaggressions, students reported a willingness to step in and not steer clear of uncomfortable conversations with friends, family, and classmates as they admitted they might have done in the past. Descriptions of marginalization by some interviewees of color affirmed the lessons of Black Lives Matter as discussed in class. Beyond the personal level, students felt this project contributed to an important dialogue on campus, serving as a stepping-stone for changes. As one student expressed, “What we have done or at least started here on campus was very important and meaningful. I hope that other students feel the same way.”

This project is not unique in fostering student understanding of course content; however, by examining their own university, students moved beyond abstract learning to develop a complex and structural understanding of racial identity, privilege, and discrimination. As my students reported, when asked how often the topic of race comes up in conversation, some interviewees reported talking about it more than they had in the past, with specific references to Ferguson and Trayvon Martin. However, even as mass media increases coverage of police shootings of black men (McLaughlin 2015), and conversations about racial inequality and injustices continue at the national level, post-racial discourse dominates. As educators, we always have the responsibility to teach and engage our students with difficult topics. The current national dialogue on racial inequality provides an opportunity to introduce and incorporate topical and powerful examples into our courses and units on race and ethnicity. It is hoped that this article provides some ideas and considerations for building student qualitative research skills as they learn to engage with and analyze their racialized and sometimes privileged social worlds.

Works Cited


Harlow, Roxanna. 2003. "‘Race Doesn’t Matter, but...’: The Effect of Race on Professors’ Experiences and Emotion


Notes

1 Using “Black Lives Matter” as a search term yielded one result (an article on a local non-violence rally) in the local newspaper for 2014. Using search terms: #BlackLivesMatter, black lives, Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Michael Brown, police violence, anti-racism did not alter the results. Changing the search keyword to “racism” yielded more results but none specific to the Black Lives Matter movement.


3 There were only two Alaska Native professors on the Juneau campus during this project (there are now three). There are no African American faculty.