

I Need Help with Teaching Racism to Students Who Appear to Internalize or Appropriately Racial Oppression

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Abstract: This narrative delineates my engagement with race discourse within social work classrooms, with particular emphasis on the personal challenges encountered in facilitating discussions among white anti-racist students, non-white students, and students of non-white backgrounds who seem to internalize and appropriate racial oppression. While existing literature offers insights into techniques for fostering racial dialogues between white and non-white students, it provides scant guidance on pedagogical methodologies tailored for individuals grappling with internalized or appropriated racial oppression. In this paper, I humbly seek guidance in devising effective strategies to address the needs of social work students who have internalized or appropriated racial oppression.

Keywords: race talk, internalized racial oppression, appropriated racial oppression, teaching strategies

Personal Background

For this reflection essay, I think I need to share my personal background first for readers to better understand how I started having this inquiry. This section elucidates the influence of my educational background and lived experiences on the development of anti-racist perspectives and practices and their subsequent implications for my pedagogical approach within the field of social work.

I obtained my master's degree in social welfare in South Korea and completed my PhD in the United States. This educational trajectory places me in a unique position within the field of social work pedagogy. Despite having less than a decade of experience in teaching social work, my primary assignments have predominantly encompassed research-oriented courses, with involvement in macro practice, introductory social welfare courses, and Human Behavior in Social Environment courses. It was not until I undertook the responsibility of teaching courses such as "Social Welfare Policy" and "Trauma and Violence" at the master's level that I became cognizant of the issue that forms the central focus of this essay.

The core themes of institutional and structural racism, alongside discrimination targeting marginalized, underserved, and disadvantaged groups, serve as the primary focal points within the curricula of the Social Welfare Policy and Trauma and Violence courses. This orientation towards racism and discrimination against racial groups presented a relatively new concept to me, considering my educational background, which did not prioritize racism in social work education. At the same time, it is crucial to note the historical legacy of discriminatory practices within my country, particularly towards specific geographical populations that positioned me within a dominant group. Additionally, I was fortunate that my experiences in the United States have not entailed significant incidents of racism or discrimination. These experiences, along with my academic exposure, have influenced the development of my anti-racism perspectives

and practices. However, my capacity to effectively teach and engage with this subject matter is owed largely to the abundance of scholarly literature and resources available, as well as the invaluable support of my colleagues who generously shared their insights and course materials.

I must admit that I retain certain apprehensions regarding scenarios outlined in the literature that concern facilitating discussions on microaggressions, structural and institutional racism, and white supremacy, particularly between white and non-white students (Sue, 2013). However, my teaching challenges regarding anti-racism education have primarily stemmed from unforeseen and unprepared-for aspects. I encountered fewer conflicts between non-white and white students than expected for a range of reasons. White social work students demonstrated a strong awareness of these issues and engaged in constructive discussions concerning potential solutions. Some white students may have chosen not to vocalize their thoughts or perspectives. In contrast, the conflicts primarily manifested between non-white students who appeared to internalize or appropriate racial oppression and their anti-racist counterparts, both white and non-white. As I teach these topics more frequently, I encounter an increasing number of instances of internalized and/or appropriated racial oppression.

Internalized and Appropriated Racial Oppression

Previously, I frequently employed the phrase, “If I can do it, you can do it, and anyone can do it,” as a means of offering encouragement within conversations with friends. However, I have since come to acknowledge the inadequacy inherent in this expression, recognizing its failure to consider individual circumstances and the diverse array of privileges I have enjoyed, which may not have been extended to others. This simplistic phrase reveals a profound ignorance of the intricate complexities present within our diverse society. Furthermore, I have come to realize that this expression can align with and perpetuate internalized racial oppression. Its underlying implication can be distilled as follows: As a non-white immigrant, I overcame all obstacles, therefore implying that others should be similarly capable. If individuals encounter setbacks in their pursuits, the implication often attributes it to their purported lack of diligence, rather than acknowledging the systemic barriers or lack of privilege they may face. This realization serves as a poignant illustration of how such expressions can unwittingly reinforce systems of white supremacy and undermine the concept of meritocracy, as elucidated by Crozier (2018).

Aligned with the principles of the Appropriated Racial Oppression theory (Campón & Carter, 2015; Rangel, 2014), meritocracy emerges as a potent mechanism reinforcing the subjugation and exploitation of marginalized communities. This phenomenon occurs concurrently with attributing an individual’s socioeconomic status solely to personal effort, thereby deflecting attention from the pervasive societal and entrenched structural racism that serves as the root cause of these disparities (Versey et al., 2019). Social work students have not proven immune to instances of appropriated racial oppression. A subset of non-white students, who have secured admission to Master of Social Work (MSW) programs or attained success in their endeavors, appears to endorse the ideology of meritocracy without adopting a critical perspective. The ensuing examples of appropriated racial oppression stem from my instructional experiences spanning diverse educational institutions over nearly a decade.

A noteworthy example of appropriated racial oppression surfaced in the behavior of a non-white immigrant student who displayed hesitation in acknowledging the inclusion of undocumented immigrants in the eligibility criteria for government-funded services, which are sustained through taxpayer contributions. This student clung to the misconception that undocumented immigrants make no fiscal contributions through taxation. Consequently, the proposition of extending eligibility to undocumented immigrants for state-funded welfare services encountered significant resistance from this student. It is intriguing to note that the student disclosed having relatives who were undocumented immigrants at the time of this discussion.

Yet another non-white immigrant student struggled with the concept of privilege, particularly its correlation with “unearned” advantages and benefits. Additionally, the student faced challenges in grasping how meritocracy could be employed as a mechanism of oppression against marginalized communities by proponents of white supremacy. This student adhered to the notion that meritocracy was universally recognized as a prevailing common-sense ideology globally. From the student’s perspective, economic advancement is deemed a fundamental objective of human existence, and it is perceived as a universally applicable default concept.

One non-white student evinced an excessive preoccupation with pro-life ideology and the criminalization of abortion, thereby impeding their capacity for critical analysis of a specific case exemplifying the limited comprehension displayed by a young white male regarding the challenges faced by pregnant women. This case example espoused the criminalization of abortion on the premise that pregnant women merely needed to carry and nourish a fetus. Notably, this student appeared to deviate from addressing the substantive issues inherent to the case, such as the potential for pregnant women to endure abuse, when engaging with the analysis of social dilemmas. Their stance leaned towards advocacy for the case, thereby overlooking the oppressive aspects experienced by pregnant women.

In discussions concerning the heightened poverty rates among non-white demographics, a significant segment of non-white students expressed the belief that individuals in poverty had not exerted adequate effort to uplift themselves from their circumstances. Furthermore, these students contended that some individuals in poverty had exploited the welfare system. This perspective disregarded the deep-seated feelings of helplessness and despair prevalent in the lives of marginalized populations.

I wish to emphasize that my intentional decision was to refrain from explicitly specifying the racial backgrounds of individual students, with the aim of mitigating the potential reinforcement of racial biases.

From my involvement in a summer leadership program tailored for refugee youth, I garnered insights into the political inclinations of numerous immigrants. Notably, I have opted not to specify the nationality of the refugee cohort, as my aim was to prevent reader confusion and the introduction of additional bias toward any particular demographic. My observations revealed that a considerable proportion of immigrants align their political loyalties with their religious beliefs, regardless of a political party’s position on immigration policies.

Upon contemplating my interactions with these students and their perspectives, I have become progressively apprehensive about the dynamics of discussions occurring within our classrooms. When such students articulate their viewpoints in classroom settings, there exists a possibility for their perspectives to inadvertently influence or distort the perceptions held by other students concerning white supremacy and racism. Given that certain students may have chosen to maintain silence deliberately, I am unable to conclusively determine the impact of these articulated viewpoints on others.

Questions

I previously harbored the assumption that individuals from non-white backgrounds inherently embraced anti-racist ideologies, a perspective I now acknowledge as overly simplistic. Consequently, as I sought out relevant literature and pedagogical resources on this subject, I began to question whether my fellow social work educators held similar assumptions or if I was singular in facing this complex quandary.

Is it sufficient to utilize identical instructional methodologies for individuals who have internalized or appropriated racial oppression as we do for students harboring explicitly racist perspectives?

Please Help Me: Suggestions

I maintain that it is crucial to continue exposing both white and non-white students to discussions on racial issues, as advocated in scholarly literature. Existing academic discourse offers insights into facilitating race-related conversations among students of varying racial backgrounds. Nevertheless, following my interactions with individuals who internalized or appropriated racial oppression, I found myself pondering the existence of social work literature that specifically addresses pedagogical strategies for instilling anti-racist principles within such individuals. Regrettably, my search for pertinent resources proved unfruitful, both within the broader academic sphere and within the domain of social work education.

In this essay, I earnestly request fellow social work educators to extend their support by sharing their own experiences and insights.

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