

# LEARNING RACE

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*The author describes her experiences as a white woman learning about race, including white privilege. She relates experiences of teaching about racism and the unexpected backlash from white students. She articulates the necessity of this continued conversation about race as part of a commitment to social work values and its mission.*

Some of my most difficult and exciting professional learning comes from my efforts to learn and teach about race. I feel up against my own ignorance on a consistent basis. It brings up feelings of fear and vulnerability. I know that I will make mistakes, reveal my biases, and demonstrate my blind spots. I am aware that what I identify as a critical moment of growth may seem inconsequential for someone else and expose my naiveté. But I have come to a point in my life in which it is more important to speak about race than it is to be seen as “right” about it. My fear of being judged is less significant than the commitment I feel to be a voice that says: Race continues to be a salient issue in the experiences of every person in the United States today. Racial justice simply cannot wait for us to have done enough work to be perfect on this issue.

## **Learning about Racism: A Dance**

My learning about racism has been a step forward, step back kind of dance, punctuated with periods of being frozen in space. At times, my frozen state has lasted for years. At other times, it's short lived; a stopping to resume breathing and see how I am being changed by the most recent catalytic events. If I think of this dance less metaphorically and more formally: the story of my racial identity development, marked by a series of events, moves me from one point to another. In my professional life, these events occur in my clinical practice, in my supervision of professional staff, and when I am advising students and teaching. I believe that if we are paying attention, our work offers us learning opportunities every day. On matters of race, I

have an intention: to see, to observe myself, and to reflect on my experience. This intention means that when the opportunity presents itself, I do not turn away, but go to it to learn what I can, to teach what I can, and to make a difference where I can.

I teach a course called “Dynamics of Racism and Oppression.” I teach this course as someone who sees myself with some expertise, but I am also a novice. The practice of teaching, like the practice of clinical social work, involves mutuality, a willingness to be changed and affected by what occurs in the process. Thus, every time I teach this class, I commit myself to entering this terrain of mutual discomfort and uncertainty. There is no place to hide behind being “the expert” who knows “the truth.” The more I do this work, the more deeply I occupy the place of: “I don't know the answers here.” I believe that as social workers our capacity to remain present in the discomfort is an essential; this skill is greatly called upon in teaching this course. The spring of 2007 offered me a critical event in my own process of racial identity and also one of my lowest moments on this journey, bringing profound doubt and a stabbing hurt.



By Kathy Lay



### Teaching about Racism

This low moment occurred oddly enough after I finished teaching what I thought was my most successful class on the "Dynamics of Racism and Oppression." I am a white social worker who has been teaching this required course to master's-level social work students since the spring of 2004. I feel called to teach this course in part because I need to talk about race. That spring's was a large class of nineteen and my first all-white class. The students were disappointed about the lack of racial diversity in the classroom. I celebrated the opportunity we had to consider the meaning of our whiteness without being concerned about the impact of our ignorance on students of color. With my fifth time teaching the class, I felt a growing confidence in my ability to connect with my students and to teach to where they were. Their papers were, overall, the best I have ever read, as most of these students honestly grappled with their racial identity and their nascent consciousness about what it means to be white in a racist society.

The term ended. I graded finals and entered my final grades. Then I read the students' course evaluations. As I read, I felt the bottom drop out of my stomach. Had I been in the same room as these students? How had I so misinterpreted their experiences? The disconnect between what I thought was happening and what their comments indicated they had experienced made me dizzy. The anger expressed by some of the students was vitriolic. I wondered about this anger and how it related to what I have come to think of as a perfect storm of discomfort for white students taking this course. The first ingredient for the storm is that despite the end of legal segregation, our residential communities are still deeply divided along racial lines. This segregation means that far too many white people grow up without developing any significant relationships across race. The second ingredient is startling on its face, but not really surprising: white people have been socialized not to talk about race, and social work students are not exempt. Many white people have the idea that, not only is it unacceptable to talk about race, but talking about race or noticing racial differences is

inherently racist. The final factor is that students know what they *don't* believe (I have yet to meet a student who actively supports a white supremacist position) and have ideas about what they *shouldn't* say or think. But, they don't really have anything proactive to take its place.

Although I saw in their papers their growing awareness of racism and white privilege, perhaps I didn't appreciate the depths of the bind they were in. They can't talk about race, they have little or no experience with people of color, and, in an ironic twist, their intellectual appreciation for diversity and social justice may further serve to cause them discomfort as they begin to recognize the gaps between their values and their ignorance. So when I read the comment: "Barbara is an unqualified teacher," how did I interpret it? I was both deeply hurt by their anger and strangely shamed by the fact that I had not intuited their feelings. How could I put together the growth I had seen in my students with the fury coming my way? Did this material make them so uncomfortable that they didn't know what else to do but blame me? Or, am I failing them in some way I don't understand? The phrase "race traitor" came into my head. It is not a phrase I ever have had occasion to use; it is not part of my common vocabulary. But that was how I felt some of my students had perceived me. When I spoke about my evaluations to my current department chair, an African American man, he said out loud the same phrase.

### Race Traitor

Webster's Third New International Dictionary (Gove, 1986) does not offer a definition for "race traitor." However it defines race in the following way: "...a class or kind of individuals with common characteristics, interests, appearances or habit as if derived from a common ancestor." It defines traitor as: "...one that violates his allegiance to his nation...by aiding its enemies." Putting these words together would have white people place people of color in the place of the enemy, and a race traitor violating her allegiance to her own people by supporting people who are racially different. To the extent that the



interests or well being of white people overlaps with the ideology of white supremacists, then being a race traitor should be a good phenomenon.

But, my experience of being seen as a race traitor brought a powerful sting. I wondered about that. Of course, the very idea embodies one of the essential dilemmas I feel in teaching this class: we use the language of race—of black, of white—at the same time that we are challenging the very idea of race as anything other than a social construction. But perhaps it is more than that. Perhaps it goes to the heart of our experience of belonging and of being comfortable. And, perhaps there is a parallel between the disconnect I felt reading those evaluations and the feelings the students had when I challenged the assumptions of belonging. As white people, they live in a society that privileges whiteness. This course suggested that the world was not as they had seen it, that racism was not a word that belonged only to the past and that there were aspects of their identity they had never considered that were vitally important.

Challenges to belonging felt like part of my landscape last spring. In addition to feeling shaken as far as my identity as a teacher, I was also aware of growing increasingly alienated from many white people who didn't see the salience of race, didn't recognize our privilege, and didn't see the injustice of racial discrimination multiple times every day. I struggle regularly with despair over how intractable structural racism seems to be. At the same time, I feel deeply dispirited about how white my world continues to be. Despite my decisions to live in Boston, an urban area with significant racial and economic diversity, to send my children to Boston public schools, and to teach this class, the most significant relationships in my life are with other white people. I do not mean to whine, and I will understand if my colleagues of color find it difficult to muster any sympathy, but it is not easy to make new relationships across race. When compared to the violence, losses, and denied opportunities that have been the faces of racism for so many people of color, this moment of mine pales. But it was (is) a real moment that falls under the heading: what

racism means to me and how it has an adverse effect on my life every day.

### **Racial Identity Development**

So, returning to the idea introduced in the beginning of this narrative, my learning about racism and the process of my racial identity development are marked by a series of events moving me along my journey. Thus, the "event" in my class that spring was one in a line of life events that have brought me from one place to another. The place I began was the Bronx. Despite being part of New York City, the neighborhood where I grew up was a segregated place: a white, Irish Catholic, working class enclave where being Italian was considered different. I remember one single black family in our neighborhood, and two black classmates at the small public school I attended down the hill from my house. I was told that they chose to be bused to our school from wherever they lived because our school was better than the one in their neighborhood.

Many people have written about racial identity development and the different processes for white people and people of color (Carter, Helms, & Juby, 2004; Hamilton-Mason, 2001; Helms, 1985; Helms, 1990; Tatum, 1992). Helms (1985) describes the Disintegration Status for whites, which she characterizes as "disorientation and anxiety provoked by unresolvable racial moral dilemmas that force one to choose between own group loyalty and humanism" (p. 185). I entered this status early on, as I became aware of the gap between rhetoric about racial equality—not to mention Christian love—and the reality of racial discrimination.

I had the good fortune to attend a public high school in Manhattan that drew students from all over the city. There I developed my first cross-race friendships. Also, I learned to talk about race, to notice that my black friends had different experiences and attitudes than I did, to engage with them about the differences between us. One of our differences was about police officers: as someone who had grown up with a father who was a cop, as were many of the adult men in my life, cops are good. For my new friends, this "cops are good" was not true for them. But my high school friendships



with black peers were not my closest and most enduring. Although there is a thread running through the next fifteen years of my life of reaching across difference, when I started social work school in 1987 my life had returned to whiteness. That is, my most significant relationships were with other white people; however white my life, I still felt an emotional, intellectual, and political passion to understand race and the role of race in my life and the lives of others.

### **Social Work: What Does Race Have to Do With It?**

When I became a social worker, I brought with me this passion for the relationship between individuals and the social-cultural context in which we live. How do we make meaning, interpret our experience, and develop our sense of who we are? What do race, gender, class, and sexual orientation have to do with it? Prior to coming to Simmons as an adjunct faculty member in 2003, I was leading professional development and supervision groups at local hospitals and other clinical training sites. During this work I experienced two critical incidents in my journey.

In the fall of 2001, I led a group for social work and psychology interns at a local training site in the Boston area. The six members and I were all women; six of us were white and one of us was black, a South African-born woman who had been in the U.S. for about a decade. Early on in the group, she took some real risks by speaking quite directly about the role that race played in her training and professional life thus far. In the training site, she occupied the "only" place when it came to race; she was the only black person in the trainee group and the only black person in a professional position at the clinic. While I listened supportively, I did not actively pursue what difference (across race, discipline, etc.) might mean to us as a group, nor did I actively keep race on the table. And, midway through the training year, without a word to anyone, she left the site and, by extension, dropped out of the group.

As the leader of the group, I wondered what responsibility I had for the fact that this woman had not spoken about the level of her

dissatisfaction with the training site. I thought about early statements she had made about the impact of race and racism on her experience as a black woman in the mental health profession. I do not hold myself singly responsible, and I am not at all sure that I could have done anything that would have changed the outcome. However, the experience led me to consult with colleagues and to reconsider the role of the leader when faced with racial differences. Starting from a point of view that saw the leader responding to group material, I came to believe that a group leader has a responsibility to raise the question of race and, further, that I had failed this group by not actively making race part of our discussion.

The following year I had another opportunity to consider my role as a leader in a multiracial group when the training group included two African American woman and one Spanish American woman as well as three white women. From the first meeting, I introduced difference—including race in a list of several—as one of the key elements of our experience. Throughout our meetings, I asked questions about the race of staff or clients being spoken about. I made an effort to highlight race as an important topic of discussion and to actively welcome it as such. The group richly grappled with their differences: professional differences between psychologist and social worker; racial differences between black and white and between black women who were at different points in their racial identity development; life circumstances between mothers and non-mothers. The group felt very successful. In end of the year evaluations, the members noted how difficult, and yet how powerful, it had been to have difference welcomed and explored rather than denied.

Then I had another experience that demonstrated the step forward, step back dance of my learning about racism. I created a workshop for the Massachusetts Chapter of NASW biennial conference on "Talking About Race." The good news is that the workshop was well subscribed. The bad news was that, in my naiveté, I imagined that I would be talking to other white people. Instead, the room was filled with a rich, multiracial group.



As I began to talk about how essential it is to talk about race in professional work, I could see nods from many of the white attendees; but the people of color in the audience were not nodding. My lesson was too basic for them. I believe this incident reflects a fundamental difference in how people of color and white people are socialized and acculturated in our society: people of color do talk about race, while white people are instilled with the belief that talking about race is racist. I noted the difference in the room, but as the entire experience of presenting was such a huge reach for me, I couldn't work it in as skillfully as I would have liked. It was a very humbling experience (dare I say humiliating?). But, it did not shake my conviction that it was essential for my white colleagues and me to move beyond this prohibition and learn to skillfully engage across and about racial difference.

### **Stepping Out of Our Comfort Zones**

When I began at Simmons as an advisor in the fall of 2003, I quickly made an appointment to talk with the person who was then chair of the "Dynamics of Racism" sequence about teaching. I had no previous teaching experience, so she tried to caution me about the challenges of this curriculum. She stressed how difficult it would be when I faced rough spots, to know to what extent they were about my inexperience as a teacher and to what extent they were about the material. Wise words, but I was determined. I felt I had both something to teach and more to learn when talking about and across race. Most significantly, I believed that I had something to offer white students, many of whom I knew had also grown up in segregated neighborhoods.

A key element of what I hope to convey to my students—perhaps, in particular, the white students with whom I work—is that stepping out of one's comfort zone is one of the fundamental requirements for doing good and effective clinical work. It might also be the first step toward cultural competence, toward being a good colleague to a multiracial cadre of other social workers in the effort to create a more just society. I want to let them

know that being comfortable with discomfort is an essential social work muscle, and that they can dare to be uncomfortable and still survive. Obviously, this message is not easily heard in first year of social work school. But, as I grow my own capacity for compassion, and as I stay on the path by continually pushing myself out of my own comfort zone, I hope my message will ring true and feel not only possible, but necessary.

Last spring, after reading my students' evaluations and feeling a drowning wave of not belonging, I talked with and got support from colleagues—both white and of color—about the evaluations. I had a conversation with a white friend who also does anti-racist work. She listened with compassion and then, with the same compassion, challenged me to step out even further. And I co-taught with an African American male colleague the course in the summer after that difficult course. I also came to appreciate the ways in which teaching this course keeps me honest, keeps me walking the path that my privilege would otherwise allow me to avoid.

### **Double Consciousness/Psychosis**

Racism in our society breeds a kind of psychosis. People of color have lived the double consciousness described by Du Bois (2007) and have struggled to integrate themselves and to be seen as whole. They have felt the power of race in shaping the way others have perceived and received them as they have faced stereotypes, discrimination, and even death. At the same time, they have been fed the myths of meritocracy, colorblindness, and equality for all. My commitment to seeing race has led me into a different realm of psychosis, and it is not pretty. It is a world where it is hard to trust one's perceptions, where one is regularly misunderstood; where one is attacked.

I have to believe that willingness to experience this psychosis, and my efforts to metabolize it, are part of what is required to dismantle racism. Teaching this course has meant making myself available to be shaken, to be misinterpreted, and to be attacked. But, it has also inspired me, allowed me to develop relationships with a wonderful group of



colleagues, given me the opportunity to connect with students on a subject I feel passionately about, and helped me to grow. It keeps me very organically on the path I am encouraging my students to walk.

Recently, I was talking with my husband about how students seem to blame me for the discomfort they feel as a result of what they are learning in this class, and how hard it could be to be a target when I have my own discomforts and doubts. He told me it was the job I had signed up for: "You didn't sign up for the kissing booth; you signed up for the dunk tank." So I guess this assertion is true. I believe we each have a responsibility to take leadership on matters of race, no matter how imperfect we may be. And, this daring to be imperfect and uncomfortable is one of the essential practices of social work, and of social change.

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