Using Racial and Class Differences in Infant Mortality to Teach about White Privilege: A Cooperative Group Activity

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Abstract
A considerable amount of research across the past several decades has documented the emergence of a new racial ideology of “color-blindness” as well as evidence that white college students have difficulty recognizing the racial privileges that are obscured by this color-blindness. To address this, we developed a cooperative group White Privilege Activity that used racial and class differences in infant mortality to help students recognize the existence of white privilege. Fielding this in two mass lecture sections of Introductory Sociology, we found that exposure to content on white privilege along with the utilization of cooperative learning group exercises promoted a greater understanding of white privilege for both white and nonwhite students. Furthermore, we found that the racial composition of cooperative learning groups had a significant impact on white students’ racial privilege attitudes.

Keywords
active learning, classroom-based exercises, scholarship of teaching and learning, race and ethnicity, inequalities

A considerable amount of research across the past several decades has documented important shifts in racial attitudes in the United States. The social and political changes in the last half of the twentieth century along with political activism of minority groups such as the Civil Rights Movement have diminished the old Jim Crow style of racism. In its place, however, a new racial ideology of “color-blindness” has emerged (Bonilla-Silva 2014; Gallagher 2003). Given the evidence that white college students have difficulty recognizing the racial inequalities and privileges that are obscured by color-blindness (see Bonilla-Silva and Forman 2000; Feagin 2013; Harris and McClure 2015), it is not surprising that a series of articles has been published in Teaching Sociology in the past decade that addressed various issues involved in teaching about color-blind thinking and white privilege. At the risk of some oversimplification, we can group these articles into three different categories.

First, a large cluster of research focuses on activities that are designed to help students “unlearn” some of the most problematic assumptions or beliefs that stem from color-blindness. For instance, Ghoshal et al. (2012) used the Implicit Association Test to help students recognize their own unconscious racial biases, challenging the idea that most individuals in today’s society no longer “see” color or judge people by the color of their skin. Another approach involves the use of cooperative group exercises, such as the one developed by Cebulak and Zipp (2018) that utilized racial and class differences in infant mortality to help students recognize the existence of white privilege. Fielding this activity in two mass lecture sections of Introductory Sociology, we found that exposure to content on white privilege along with the utilization of cooperative learning group exercises promoted a greater understanding of white privilege for both white and nonwhite students. Furthermore, we found that the racial composition of cooperative learning groups had a significant impact on white students’ racial privilege attitudes.

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skin (in other words, the idea that most people are “color-blind”). In a related vein, the color-blind ideology also leads many individuals to view the United States as a land of equal opportunity, where institutional discrimination has primarily been outlawed (Bonilla-Silva 2014; Gallagher 2003). Johnson and Mason (2017) tried to address this belief with their oral history assignment. Although their activity motivated students to discuss past racial injustices with someone who had lived during the Civil Rights era, many white students failed to recognize how these racial injustices may still operate today, although in a less covert form. To illuminate modern instances of racism at the institutional level, Seguin, Nierobisz, and Kozlowski (2017) had students explore residential segregation maps, while Laundra and Sutton (2008) had students consider how a preference for white dialect and culture can create institutionalized bias within standardized testing.

Because color-blindness inhibits individuals from recognizing modern instances of racial inequality, a second group of articles explores how color-blindness works to maintain and conceal white privilege. For example, Chesler et al. (2006) found that service learning led peer facilitators to recognize how color-blindness inhibited them from thinking about their own group position and privilege. Peer facilitators also noted how easily privilege was reproduced by students inside the classroom and staff and clients at the service site. Even after incorporating sociological concepts into community service classes, Hochschid, Farley, and Chee (2014) found that students still had trouble articulating how privilege had affected their own life chances. Finally, although Paino et al.’s (2017) “Intersectionopoly” game clearly helped students identify disadvantages and biases built into the economic system, “advantaged” players often admitted forgetting about or even enjoying the privileges they were afforded during the game.

Finally, a smaller group of articles in Teaching Sociology focus on the notion of meritocracy. Meritocracy is an important aspect of color-blind ideology often used to minimize the impact of racism and white privilege and support the idea that class matters more than race (Bonilla-Silva 2014; Gallagher 2003; Wilson 1978). As Gallagher (2003) explains, if the United States is a meritocratic society, hard work and talent are rewarded so that one’s lack of success must stem from individual and/or cultural deficiencies, which often results in a lower class status. Thus, the meritocratic lens that color-blindness provides allows for racial inequalities to be explained away by the implication that minorities must be not working hard enough while simultaneously disregarding issues of systematic racism or the benefits of white privilege.

For instance, Mueller (2013) had students do a family research project to trace their families’ wealth acquisition to challenge notions of “hard work” and meritocracy. In doing so, Mueller (2013) found that it required a deep analysis of the ways in which students’ own families were advantaged or disadvantaged by political policies and ties to slavery before they could question the role of hard work in success. In their service learning project, Becker and Paul (2015) found that both black and white students argued that class matters more than race in their reflection assignments, making it difficult for them to imagine how race matters in terms of people’s life experiences.

In a related vein, as noted by others, media depictions of middle- to upper-class minorities (e.g., Blackish) as well as other examples of upwardly mobile, successful African Americans (e.g., Barack Obama) underscore these beliefs in meritocracy. Khanna and Harris (2015a) had students analyze network television to explore the ways in which the media often privileges whiteness while also subordinating and stereotyping minorities, including those who are portrayed as upper class. Responding to a critique of their work, Khanna and Harris (2015b) quoted Michael Arceneaux (2012): “We see the black upper middle class—and those heading there—on TV. What we don’t see is the black working class.”

Despite our brief review and the quality of the research cited previously, we can draw two conclusions. First, and not surprisingly, it is very difficult to teach white college students to recognize white privilege. Second, although scholars have designed a number of activities that attempt to dispel beliefs in color-blindness, white privilege, and meritocracy, we have yet to find any activities/exercises that focus specifically on the ways that upwardly mobile, successful minorities may continue to lack privilege (or experience racism) despite their economic success.

We attempted to address these shortcomings through our White Privilege Activity (described in the following). First, we built on Irby-Shasanmi, Oberlin, and Saunders’s (2012) Health Privilege Activity, which explores the multilevel ways that individuals can be advantaged or disadvantaged in terms of health. Like Irby-Shasanmi et al. (2012), we also used racial differences in infant mortality.
as a window for exploring health privilege. But in contrast to Irby-Shasanmi et al. (2012), we focus on the ways that class privilege often fails to protect minorities from the effects of racism, especially when it comes to health.

Racial discrimination is said to be damaging to health because it continues to trigger the body’s stress response, wearing the body out over time (Smedley et al. n.d.). A large body of literature supports the association between racism, stress, and health even after accounting for differences in socioeconomic status (Williams 2006; Williams et al. 1997; Williams and Mohammed 2009; Williams, Neighbors, and Jackson 2003). As Smedley, Stith, and Nelson (2003:5) explain, “Evidence of racial and ethnic disparities in health care is, with few exceptions, remarkably consistent across a range of illnesses and healthcare services . . . even after adjustment for socioeconomic differences and other healthcare access-related factors.” This is also true of reproductive health.

For instance, African American women’s lifetime exposure to interpersonal racism along with perception of exposure to racial discrimination during pregnancy have been found to be associated with a significantly higher risk of very low birthweight (VLBW) (Collins et al. 2004; Lespinasse et al. 2004). Domínguez et al. (2008) also report that lifetime and childhood indicators of perceived racism were a significant predictor of birthweight in African Americans but not non-Hispanic whites. Furthermore, the association between racism and birthweight outcomes tends to persist across maternal sociodemographic, biomedical, and behavioral characteristics (Collins et al. 2004; Domínguez et al. 2008). Because racial difference in infant mortality persist net of class differences, they are a particularly good illustration of the effects of white privilege and racism on health despite one’s socioeconomic status. As Khanna and Harris (2015b:243) explain, “While other social identities may mediate the ways in which whites experience race privilege, whites (regardless of social class) do experience some level of race privilege by virtue of their whiteness.”

Second, as previous researchers have found, even while focusing on the lack of racial privilege experienced by economically successful minorities, significant hurdles still need to be overcome to help students understand the effects of color-blindness and white privilege. Thus, we designed a two-day, active learning, cooperative group exercise with a particular focus on the ways in which African Americans’ socioeconomic success does not necessarily eliminate racial differences in health outcomes to test if this could make white privilege and the problems of color-blindness salient.

In the next two sections, we describe our White Privilege Activity in detail.

THE WHITE PRIVILEGE ACTIVITY: BACKGROUND

The origins of this paper are in a College Teaching seminar taken by the lead author and taught by the second author. Based on her work in the seminar, the first author developed an active learning exercise designed to increase students’ understanding of white privilege. Although the first author was happy with the exercise and student feedback from it, her classes were too small for her to have reliable results as to its effectiveness. When they were discussing the issue, the second author noted that he was teaching two mass lecture Introduction to Sociology sections and that she would be welcome to present the activity in them.

There were several aspects of the courses that, independent of the White Privilege Activity, made it extremely suitable with only a few minor adjustments. First, for years as part of normal instructional practices, the second author has asked students to complete a brief survey at the beginning of the course that has a series of factual (e.g., percentage of US adults with college degrees, comparative data on infant mortality) and attitudinal (always on some aspects of class, race, and/or gender inequality) questions. In previous semesters, the instructor has used the results to help structure lectures and discussions on the associated material. One problem in the past, however, was that a substantial majority of students—typically about two-thirds—did not complete the initial survey, and thus it was not clear the degree to which the responses reflected the class as a whole. To rectify this problem, the second author decided to offer a small amount of extra credit (3 points; there were 500 total points in the course) for taking the survey.

Second, in the past, the second author then had students answer the same (and other questions) right before and/or after the associated material was to be presented as a way to gauge student learning. Again, having data from only one-third of the students that answered the initial survey hindered the ability to understand any changes. Offering the new opportunity for extra credit helped solve this problem. As an additional change, the second author planned to implement two additional waves of the survey: right before the inequality section and in the last two weeks, after the
Thanksgiving break (this turned out to be two weeks after the presentation on race). The three surveys included seven items measuring “color-blind racism” (Neville et al. 2000) and one gender roles question.

Third, as in the past, the second author randomly assigned students to sit in four-person, cooperative learning groups throughout the semester. As Nilson (2010:156) notes, at least three decades of research has found that cooperative group work has a positive effect on learning, interpersonal relationships, and psychological health (also see Astin 1993; Caufield and Persell 2006; Johnson, Johnson, and Smith 1991; McKeachie 2002; Millis and Cottell 1998; Quarstein and Peterson 2001; Rau and Heyl 1990; Slavin 1990). In every class session, the instructor posed one or more questions that students were to discuss with their group members; on 13 Wednesdays throughout the semester, students took a graded quiz either as a group or after discussing the material with their group.

By chance, due to the racial composition of the classes during the semester of the activity (76 percent of the students identified as white), one-half of the cooperative groups had all white students, with the remainder having at least one nonwhite member (almost two-thirds of the time, the nonwhite member self-identified as African American). Thus, there were no groups that had all nonwhite members. The white privilege exercise involved a two-day presentation on racial inequality during the 12th week of the course. The design of the presentation required students to complete some ungraded individual and group work on Monday and some graded group work on Wednesday. Thus, students who were used to discussing all sorts of material with their group members for almost three months also discussed and debated various aspects of white privilege, with some doing it in an all white group and others in a mixed race group. Two recent meta-analyses of intergroup contact studies found that intergroup contact is effective in reducing prejudice, especially for majority members (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006; Tropp and Pettigrew 2005). Therefore, the grouping of our students provided us with another avenue for assessment, but only for white students: whether sitting in a racially homogeneous or heterogeneous group impacts white students’ recognition of white privilege.

Before describing the activity in more detail, it is important to point out that when instructors form groups, as opposed to letting students self-select into them, the possibility exists that these forced interactions may be more uncomfortable for some students than it is for others. We recognize that it may be difficult to discuss racial matters in a group in which one is also a numerical minority among a group of all white students, above and beyond what might be seen as an appropriate level of intellectual discomfort that might normally occur in a typical sociology course that addresses various types of inequality. Researchers of intergroup contact theory and cooperative learning groups, however, also warn of the possible participant selection bias that may occur when letting groups self-select (Johnson, Johnson, and Maruyama 1983; Pettigrew 1998; Pettigrew and Tropp 2006). For example, prejudiced people may avoid contact with outgroup members, reducing the possibility for the intended positive effect of intergroup contact (Pettigrew 1998; Pettigrew and Tropp 2006). As Johnson et al. (1983) note, because it is rare for cross-ethnic friendships to emerge simply by students being in desegregated classrooms, efforts must be made to construct heterogeneous groups.

One way we aimed to reduce at least some of any possible discomfort was by addressing these topics several months into the semester so that students knew each other much better by then. Furthermore, during the activity, the first author made sure to inform the class that each student in the class should have something to say about their experience with race. The first author then followed this instruction with an example of her own white privilege (i.e., her status as a white instructor teaching the topic of race). By making this announcement, the goal was to help establish some of the conditions necessary for effective intergroup contact (common goals, intergroup cooperation, and support of authorities; Pettigrew 1998).

THE WHITE PRIVILEGE ACTIVITY: THE DETAILS

The White Privilege Activity was implemented across two 50-minute class periods in two different Introduction to Sociology sections. On the first day, the first author began with a short, 10- to 15-minute lecture that contrasted individualized racism with institutional forms of racism. Both institutionalized and personally mediated racism impact health along with issues of internalized racism (Jones 2000, 2002). After the lecture, the first author presented students with data reflecting racial differences in infant mortality rates. While working in their groups, the first author asked...
students to think of as many reasons as possible for African Americans’ higher rates of infant mortality compared to whites. After about five minutes, we created a master list of the students’ answers. As the first author has frequently experienced in the past, students in both sections mainly cited class-based inequalities (e.g., lack of access to health care or neighborhood deprivation) and negative individual behaviors (e.g., smoking or drug use) for disparities in infant mortality rates.

After creating our master list, students watched a short video clip (6:07 minutes) from “When the Bough Breaks,” which is part of a larger PBS documentary series named Unnatural Causes (Strain 2008b). During the video, students were introduced to Kim Anderson, an African American female lawyer who eats well, lives in a good neighborhood, and avoids negative health behaviors. Despite this, Kim Anderson gave birth prematurely. The video also features commentary and research from a number of health scholars. For example, during the clip, students learned that college-educated African Americans have higher infant mortality rates than whites without a high school diploma. In addition, the video also includes a discussion of the work of David and Collins (1997), whose findings suggest that these black-white infant mortality disparities cannot be explained by genetic differences as African-born black women’s infant birth weight patterns more closely match those of US-born white women than those of US-born black women. After the video, we returned to our master list of reasons for racial differences in infant mortality that we created before the clip.

While discussing it with the class, the first author placed an X next to any reasons that would not likely explain why college-educated African Americans suffer from such high infant mortality rates. Again, the first author consistently found that most of the students’ original answers now had an X. Students were left to ponder the reasons for high infant mortality rates among well-educated African Americans. We discussed some possibilities before ending class for the day. If one or more students did cite stress as a reason for higher rates of infant mortality among African American women (which did happen in one of the two classes), the first author then asked the student(s) to explain and elaborate on their answer for the class. (In the case of the one student, their answer mainly revolved around stress in general rather than the effects of racial stress.) Students such as these, however, provide a jumping off point to learn more during the next phase of the activity.

Beginning on the second day, the first author again performed a short, 10- to 15-minute lecture, this time introducing the concept of white privilege. The first author connected this material to the first day’s lecture by presenting white privilege as the “other side” of racism, meaning that both advantages and disadvantages stem from the same racial structure. During the lecture, students also learned to distinguish between economic and racial privilege. To help make this point, the first author presented a chart that examines weekly earnings by race/ethnicity and how these wage gaps persist across all education levels. To specifically introduce students to the idea that higher class African Americans can also lack privilege, the first author used the controversy surrounding the citizenship status of President Barack Obama as an example. After the brief lecture, students read the list of privileges identified in McIntosh’s (1990) “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack.” After reviewing the list, the first author asked students to discuss their general reactions to McIntosh’s (1990) piece with their group.

After a short group session, students watched a second clip (4:14 minutes) from “When the Bough Breaks” (Strain 2008a). In this final video, students were presented with an explanation for high infant mortality rates among upper-class African Americans: the stressors of racism. As Camara Jones (2000, 2002) explains in the video, it is like “gunning the engine of that car, just wearing it out….without rest. And I think that the stressors of everyday racism are doing that.” In the clip, students learned that the cumulative impact of racism over the life course is associated with profound negative health effects, including on infant and fetal health. Michael C. Lu, who suggests using a life course perspective or approach for examining or addressing issues of racism and reproductive health (Lu et al. 2010; Lu and Halfon 2003), is also featured in the clip. The essential point of the video is that even upper-class minorities are not immune to the effects of racism, given their high infant mortality rates compared to both lower- and upper-class whites. For example, focus groups with socioeconomically diverse African American women of childbearing age reveal reports of racism across the life course and various life domains (Nuru-Jeter et al. 2009). To solidify these points, the first author asked students to break into their groups for a final time and instructed them to refer back to McIntosh’s (1990) list. This final part of the activity serves two purposes: to (1) further decouple class privilege from racial privilege and (2)
explore the lack of privilege (or racism) that upper-class minorities may experience on a daily basis that leads to the cumulative impact of racism over the life course.

In the final phase of the activity, students first worked with their groups to find privileges from the checklist that upper-class minorities may lack regardless of socioeconomic status (e.g., “I do not have to educate my children to be aware of systemic racism for their own daily physical protection”; McIntosh 1990). Next, the first author asked students to identify privileges on the list that more well-to-do minorities may find harder to acquire or experience (e.g., “I can go home from most meetings of organizations I belong to feeling somewhat tied in, rather than isolated, out-of-place, outnumbered, unheard, held at a distance or feared”; McIntosh 1990). From there, the first author instructed students to consider ways that economic opportunity (e.g., receiving a high-paying job or moving into an upper-class neighborhood) may also introduce minorities to spaces that are traditionally dominated by whites. In our final discussion of the activity, the first author emphasized the very opportunities that are associated with positive health (e.g., the well-paying job) are also places that minorities may experience negative health effects resulting from the cumulative impact of racism.

**DATA AND METHODS**

We fielded our activity in two mass lecture sections of Introductory Sociology at a large, open access, public university in the Midwest. There were 243 students across the two sections of the course (134 in the first section, 109 in the second) and three waves of the survey. The initial survey window opened one week prior to the semester starting and was open through the third week of the semester (August 22–September 15). Wave 2 opened October 18 through November 4, and Wave 3 was from November 28 through December 9. Having the possibility of extra credit indeed promoted high response rates: 91.8 percent of students responded in Wave 1 (N = 223), 84.8 percent in Wave 2 (N = 206), and 83.5 percent in Wave 3 (N = 203).

Of course, as might be expected, not all of the students did all three surveys, and therefore, they are excluded from the final sample. We also eliminated anyone who did not attend at least one of the lectures on racial inequality (121 students went to both lectures) as it makes little sense to assess the impact of material that one was not exposed to. Taking both these issues into account resulted in an effective final sample size of 173 students (overall response rate = 71.2 percent). Within our final sample, there were 132 students who self-identified as white, with 41 nonwhites (26 self-identified as black/African American, 9 as two or more races, 4 as Latino/Hispanic, and 2 as Asian). Almost 60 percent of those in the effective sample were women, and 60 percent were also 18 or 19 years old. Approximately 95 percent were full-time students. For almost half the sample, this course was among the first college courses that they took.

Our dependent variable comes from the Color-Blind Racial Attitudes Scale (CoBRAS; Neville et al. 2000). The theoretical underpinning of this scale is the idea that race does not and should not matter, hence the idea of being color-blind. The full CoBRAS scale has 26 items that Neville et al. (2000) found clustered into three main factors; the first of these had seven items that accounted for 31 percent of the variance among the original 26 items (the other two factors accounted for an additional 8 and 6 percent of the variance). Neville et al. (2000:63) labeled this factor Racial Privilege because “the items loading highest on the factor referred to blindness of the existence of White privilege.” The seven items (all measured on a 6-point scale of strongly disagree to strongly agree) are:

- Everyone who works hard, no matter what race they are, has an equal chance to become rich.
- Race plays a major role in the type of social services (e.g., type of health care or day care) that people receive in the United States.
- Race is very important in determining who is successful and who is not.
- Racial and ethnic minorities do not have the same opportunities as White people in the United States.
- White people in the United States have certain advantages because of the color of their skin.
- White people are more to blame for racial discrimination than racial and ethnic minorities.
- Race plays an important role in who gets sent to prison.

We reverse-coded the first item, summed the responses, and divided by 7 to maintain the same 6-point scale. The scale proved highly reliable in all three waves: Cronbach’s alphas were .80 (Wave 1), .82 (Wave 2), and .80 (Wave 3).
Our main research question centers on whether being exposed to content on white privilege while using an active learning technique promotes a greater understanding of the concept for both white and nonwhite students. A second concern is restricted to white students: Does being in a group with nonwhites have an impact on one’s racial privilege attitudes?

RESULTS

As noted, our primary research question has to do with the impact that our White Privilege Activity, which distinguishes racial inequality from class inequality, has in sensitizing students to the presence of white privilege. At first glance (see Table 1: “All Students”), there were significant differences across the semester in white privilege attitudes (repeated measures ANOVA, with single within-subjects variable; this and all others are two-tailed tests): Mean CoBRA scores increased (recall that higher scores indicate a greater recognition of white privilege) from 3.11 (at the beginning of the semester) to 3.40 (before the racial inequality presentations) to 3.74 (at the end of the semester).

Having found overall mean differences, we then did a series of paired $t$ tests (172 degrees of freedom for each) to see which particular differences were statistically significant. These results indicate that students were more aware of racial privilege at the end of the semester than at the beginning, before the race lectures than at the beginning of the semester, and at the end of the semester than before the racial inequality lectures. The Cohen $d$s indicate just short of a large effect for the semester changes, a small effect before the activity, and a small-moderate effect after the activity. In terms of the scale values, in all three waves, the average student was between disagree slightly and agree slightly but much closer to the former at the beginning of the semester and much closer to the latter after taking the course.

These results, although telling, combine both white and nonwhite students; it could be that changes in one of these racial groups is accounting for the overall changes. To address this possibility, we reran the analyses separately for white ($N = 132$) and nonwhite ($N = 41$) students. Those results are also contained in Table 1 (see rows for “Whites” and “Nonwhites,” respectively), and they almost but not completely replicate the overall patterns.

<p>| Table 1. Mean Differences in White Privilege Attitudes across Survey Waves (Repeated Measures ANOVA with Single within-subjects Variable). |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wave</th>
<th>Wave 2</th>
<th>Wave 3</th>
<th>$F$</th>
<th>$\eta^2$</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Wave 2 Versus 1</th>
<th>Wave 3 Versus 1</th>
<th>Wave 3 Versus 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All students (SD)</td>
<td>3.11 (.97)</td>
<td>3.40 (1.05)</td>
<td>3.74 (1.00)</td>
<td>50.56***</td>
<td>.372</td>
<td>173</td>
<td>3.24***</td>
<td>10.08***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White students</td>
<td>3.05 (93)</td>
<td>3.39 (1.07)</td>
<td>3.68 (1.03)</td>
<td>37.92***</td>
<td>.368</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>3.42***</td>
<td>8.69***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonwhite students</td>
<td>3.31 (1.04)</td>
<td>3.42 (0.99)</td>
<td>3.95 (0.89)</td>
<td>13.32***</td>
<td>.427</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>.59 (0.9)</td>
<td>5.06***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White students in racially homogenous groups</td>
<td>3.15 (0.95)</td>
<td>3.47 (1.09)</td>
<td>3.69 (1.04)</td>
<td>13.32***</td>
<td>.294</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>2.42#</td>
<td>5.20***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White students in racially heterogeneous groups</td>
<td>2.95 (.92)</td>
<td>3.31 (1.05)</td>
<td>3.67 (1.03)</td>
<td>26.06***</td>
<td>.449</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>2.42#</td>
<td>7.15***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$p < .05. **p < .01$ (two-tailed $t$ test).
presentations (Wave 3 vs. Wave 2). Similar to the whole sample, these results indicate close to a large effect across the semester, a small-moderate effect before the activity, and a small effect after the activity.

The results for nonwhite students are listed in the middle row of Table 1. Once again, when using a repeated measures ANOVA, we found an overall significant difference across the three survey waves. Although the results from paired t tests indicate significant differences across the semester (Wave 3 vs. Wave 1) and after the racial inequality lectures (Wave 3 vs. Wave 2), they also indicate that nonwhite students did not increase their awareness of white privilege from the beginning of the semester until the presentations on racial inequality (Wave 2 vs. Wave 1). Perhaps this lack of change stems from a slightly greater awareness of white privilege at the beginning of the course (nonwhite CoBRA mean was 3.31, while the corresponding figure for whites was 3.05) or that it took an explicit focus on racial inequality to prompt these changes. Either way, for both nonwhites and white students, the lectures/activities on racial inequality significantly increased their awareness of white privilege.

At this point, we can conclude the following: There were changes over time in attitudes toward white privilege for both white and nonwhite students, though no difference between Waves 1 and 2 for nonwhites. Thus, the class in general—without covering race as a topic—made whites but not nonwhites more aware of the existence of racial inequality. The White Privilege Activity, though, increased both groups’ awareness of white privilege.

Although these are notable findings, we did have one other question for white students. As it turned out, half of the white students (N = 66) sat in groups that were all white, while the other 66 white students sat with groups that had at least one nonwhite student (53 of these students had only 1 nonwhite student in their group). As noted previously, as he had done in previous courses, the second author randomly placed students in groups and required students to sit with their groups every day (beginning in week three) to facilitate learning. Throughout the semester, there were a series of activities, ranging from discussion, through graded individual/group and group only work, that provided opportunities for students to talk with each other on a regular basis. It also was not uncommon for students to talk with one or more of their group members before class started. Because students were randomly placed into these groups, we have a natural experiment of sorts as to the impact that being in a single versus mixed race group has on the racial attitudes of white students.

The results for this analysis are presented in the last two rows of Table 1. Turning first to results for whites who sat in all white groups (“White Students in Racially Homogeneous Groups”), a repeated measures ANOVA found significant differences among the three waves. More interesting, however, are the paired t tests. Although whites in white only groups increased their awareness of white privilege across the semester as a whole (Wave 3 = 3.69 vs. Wave 1 = 3.15), these increases were due to being in the course in general (Wave 2 = 3.47 vs. Wave 1 = 3.15) as the explicit coverage of racial inequality had no statistically significant impact on their racial attitudes (Wave 3 = 3.69 vs. Wave 2 = 3.47).

The results for whites in racially mixed groups are in the bottom panel of Table 1. Once again, there were significant differences across the three survey waves. In contrast to whites who sat in racially homogenous groups, however, whites who were in racially mixed groups became more cognizant of white privilege throughout the semester (Wave 1 = 2.95 vs. Wave 3 = 3.67), from the beginning of the course to before the racial inequality presentations (Wave 1 = 2.95 to Wave 2 = 3.31, and after the racial inequality lectures (Wave 2 = 3.31 to Wave 3 = 3.67).

In summary, white students, whether they sat in racially homogeneous or heterogeneous groups, increased their awareness of white privilege from the beginning of the semester until the end of the semester. The presentation and activities on racial inequality, however, did not increase the racial awareness of white students who only sat with other white students. The formal treatment of racial inequality (although racial differences on numerous topics such as crime, the family, and socialization were covered prior to this formal treatment) only made white students more cognizant of white privilege when they were in racially mixed groups. Thus, it appears that being exposed to the White Privilege Activity in a mixed race group is what makes whites more receptive to material on racial inequality.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

To recall, we had two primary research questions: (1) Does exposure to content on white privilege along with the utilization of cooperative learning group exercises promote a greater understanding of white privilege for both white and nonwhite
students? and (2) Does the racial composition of cooperative learning groups have an impact on white students’ racial privilege attitudes? We assessed these effects in three waves of data collection (at the beginning of the semester, in the middle of the semester before any formal treatment of inequality, and at the end of the semester) using seven items from the Color-Blind Racial Attitudes Scale that specifically measures unawareness of racial privilege.

Our initial findings suggested an affirmative answer to our first research question: Both white and nonwhite students significantly increased their recognition of white privilege after our group activity (see Table 1). Thus, at first blush, it appeared that the form and content of our exercise—an extensive, two-day cooperative group activity that focused on distinguishing class from racial privilege while utilizing repeated small group work and discussions—increased students’ awareness of the existence of white privilege.

Support for this interpretation, however, needs to be qualified in a number of ways. In response to the accidental yet fortuitous event in which white students were split equally among racially homogeneous (all white) and heterogeneous (mixed race) groups, we formed our second research question and tested whether racial group composition had an effect on white students’ understanding of white privilege. Although whites in homogeneous racial groups significantly increased their recognition of white privilege across the semester as a whole (from Wave 1 to 3 and from Wave 1 to 2), our White Privilege Activity did not itself impact these students’ attitudes regarding white privilege (Wave 2 to Wave 3). In contrast, whites who sat in racially mixed groups increased their understanding of white privilege across all three waves. Therefore, we need to qualify our interpretation for white students: Exposure to sociology without a particular emphasis on racial inequality increases the average white student’s recognition of the existence of racial privilege. It is the opportunity, however, to work throughout the semester with others who do not share the same racial experiences that appears to make white students more receptive to material that focuses explicitly on white privilege.

Before turning to the implications of these results, it is important to note some limitations of our study. To begin, it would have been advantageous to repeat more items across all three waves of the survey. (Unfortunately, only one question on gender roles appeared in all three waves.) Including a wider range of items would allow us to determine what other attitude changes occurred throughout the semester, especially in terms of the course topics that we did not focus on more explicitly or in greater detail. A second limitation is directed less at our work and more at the generalizability of it and concerns having racially homogeneous/heterogeneous groups of students. As we noted previously, we randomly assigned students to groups; however, the class’s racial composition (approximately 25 percent of the class was nonwhite) resulted in having an equal number of white students as part of all white and racially mixed groups. Clearly, other settings will vary in the degree to which this sort of grouping is possible. Finally, a third limitation is that our study only measures short-term attitudinal changes; it is an open question as to how long these attitudes might persist. These limitations aside, our findings have important implications both for teaching about white privilege and the ways in which a reduction in color-blindness through cooperative group work might affect race relations for white and nonwhite students.

Our results touch on the difficulty that previous scholars have identified in getting white students to recognize the existence of white privilege and more generally, the influence that an ideology of color-blindness has when they try to address these topics directly. Recall that white students, even those who sat in racially homogenous groups, increased their awareness of white privilege by being exposed to general sociological materials, none of which focused explicitly on racial privilege. In one sense, perhaps sociology’s (and the course’s) overarching concerns with having students think critically about the social world provided them with the necessary intellectual wherewithal to begin to understand the presence of white privilege in our society.

Our activity, however, much like others designed to focus on racial inequality, also had some limitations as to its effectiveness. Although the exercise dramatically increased nonwhite students’ recognition of white privilege (mean CoBRA scores went from 3.42 before the activity to 3.95 after it, close to a large Cohen’s $d$ effect), the activity only significantly impacted white students who sat with at least one nonwhite student. It may be that it takes repeated small group interactions with at least one nonwhite peer to help white students be more open to receiving materials that explicitly focus on white privilege.

Our second implication builds on this point and ties together several strands of research that, taken
together, suggest that cooperative group work aimed at reducing color-blindness may not only be beneficial for learning but also for reducing racial prejudice, especially among white students. To begin, as we noted previously, decades of research support the benefits of group learning. In addition, research, often from precollege educational settings, suggests that racially mixed cooperative learning groups increase learning and foster more positive interactions among people with different backgrounds (Johnson et al. 1983; Slavin 1991; Wenzel 2000).

Theoretically, the ways that intergroup contact can be effective in reducing prejudice among majority and minority group members can be traced to Allport (1954). When developing what is now known as intergroup contact theory, Allport (1954) specified four conditions for prejudice reduction to occur: (1) equal status among group members, (2) common goals, (3) intergroup cooperation, and (4) support of authorities, law, or custom. Perhaps not surprisingly, these overlap considerably with many of the characteristics (e.g., positive interdependence and individual accountability) that are necessary for cooperative group learning to be effective (Nilson 2010).

Since Allport’s (1954) original work, a number of scholars have attempted to test its effects, resulting in a large body of research spanning many decades. One of the most extensive and rigorous meta-analyses of intergroup contact studies (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006) found that (a) intergroup contact is effective in reducing prejudice and (b) these effects hold for both men and women across a variety of age groups and is especially effective for college students. Finally, given that Neville et al. (2013) suggest that there is a relationship between color-blindness and increased racial prejudice, anger, and fear, cooperative group work specifically aimed at combating color-blindness may be a particularly effective way for white students to reduce their racial prejudice.

A reduction in color-blindness may also be beneficial for nonwhite students. Researchers have suggested that African Americans who adhere to the color-blind ideology are more likely to suffer from an internalization of oppression and racial stereotypes (Neville et al. 2005). Although nonwhite students did not significantly increase their recognition of white privilege from Wave 1 to Wave 2 (possibly due to their initial high score at Wave 1), they did have a significant increase after our White Privilege Activity (from 3.42 at Wave 2 to 3.95 at Wave 3) and across the semester as a whole (from 3.31 at Wave 1 to 3.95 at Wave 3). Because of the demographic limitations of our classroom, however, we were only able to test these effects for nonwhite students in heterogeneous (mixed race) groups. (We also had nothing to compare with as we had no homogenous groups with all nonwhite students.) Therefore, we do not know whether racially homogenous, all minority groups would have been more or less beneficial in terms of nonwhite students’ learning about white privilege.

One caution here is that although a reduction in prejudice through intergroup contact works for both majority and minority group members, there is evidence that suggests that the effects are stronger for majority group members (Tropp and Pettigrew 2005). In addition, Lewis, Chesler, and Forman (2000) find that interactions with white students can have a negative impact on students of color, especially when students’ behaviors and attitudes include patterns of color-blindness and ethnic and racial stereotyping. For example, Lewis et al. (2000:79) report that white students often expect African Americans to be “experts” in their group experience, which is often equated with urban life and poverty. Furthermore, Mitchell and Donahue (2009) find that students of color report doing more service in their service learning classes than at their site as they feel responsible to challenge their white classmates’ lack of awareness about race and racism (including their unexamined privilege), often by sharing their own life experiences. Although we tried to mitigate this effect by explaining that all students should have something to discuss in terms of their experiences with race and/or white privilege, it is possible that intergroup contact activities that encourage students to share their racial experiences may only exaggerate this issue.

As Lewis et al. (2000) go on to explain, however, many of these negative interactions are allowed to perpetuate because of the institutional context in which they occur, such as issues with the course curriculum and/or the role or behavior of the faculty. “Yet too often, by design or omission, colleges miss the opportunity to teach positive forms of interracial/ethnic interaction, and therefore fail to help lay the groundwork for real changes in group relations and the distribution of power on campus and in the society” (Lewis et al. 2000:88). Therefore, it is possible that shorter-term negative effects on students of color may also produce future, more long-term benefits.

Given this, we suggest a number of possibilities for future research. Unfortunately, we were unable to test these topics with our data. First, although we
have found that intergroup contact and/or a reduction in color-blindness can have a positive effect in the short run, we do not know how long these effects will last. More research is needed at the collegiate level to assess the longer-term effects that intergroup contact and/or a reduction in color-blindness has on both whites and students of color. Furthermore, as noted earlier, researchers should test the effects that racial group composition has on nonwhite students both in terms of learning about color-blindness and white privilege as well as the emotional effects of intergroup contact. A reduction in color-blindness may be beneficial for students of color, but we also need to gauge the impact and emotional stress that these types of interactions have on minority students, which may outweigh the benefits.

EDITOR’S NOTE

Reviewers for this manuscript were, in alphabetical order, Sarah Becker, Meghan Burke, Lauren Dundes, and Raj Ghoshal.

NOTES

1. It is important to note that despite these meta-analyses, some scholars (Bonilla-Silva and Embrick 2007; Bonilla-Silva, Goar, and Embrick 2006) have questioned the utility or impact of intergroup contact, essentially arguing that the social and residential segregation of whites and blacks has created a “white habitus,” or “a set of primary networks and associations with other whites that reinforces the racial order by fostering racial solidarity among whites and negative affect toward racial ‘others’” (Bonilla-Silva 2014:16). A white habitus hinders the ability of whites to develop meaningful relationships with minorities both spatially and psychologically; typical “friendships” between whites and blacks are relatively short-lived, cursory, and tend to be exaggerated (Bonilla-Silva and Embrick 2007; Bonilla-Silva et al. 2006). In other words, a limited amount of contact is not likely to have a substantial impact on whites’ racial attitudes. However, and perhaps most pertinent to our study, Goar and Sell’s (2005) experiment involving racially heterogeneous groups of white and black women found that even relatively short interactions (10 minutes of structured time, plus a bit after the experiment ended) decreased racial inequality within groups.

2. There is some medical sociology literature on what has been called the Hispanic paradox, in which infant mortality rates for Latinos are more similar to those of whites than those of African Americans. Although a full discussion of this is beyond the scope of this paper, research indicates that American-born Hispanics show prevalence rates and patterns of accumulation of stressors comparable to blacks, while foreign-born Hispanics have stress profiles similar to whites (Sternthal, Slopen, and Williams 2011). Furthermore, Latino immigrants’ health has been found to decline across generations in the United States (Bostean 2013). Finally, Scribner and Dwyer (1989) report that increases in acculturation among Latino mothers of Mexican decent are associated with an increase in risk in maternal low birth-weight even after controlling for age, education, and wealth. Thus, part of the Hispanic paradox may be a methodological artifact of comparing groups with less exposure to the daily stresses of racial/ethnic discrimination. For example, according to CDC (2016) statistics from 2014, Puerto Rican Hispanics experienced infant mortality rates of 7.2 infant deaths per 1,000 live births, while Mexican (4.8), Cuban (3.9), and Central and South American (4.3) Hispanics tended to have lower rates of infant mortality.

3. Bonilla-Silva (2014) has questioned the efficacy of using quantitative data to measure an ideology like color-blindness, and his points are worth noting. As Bonilla-Silva (2014:11) explains, color-blindness has created a unique sort of social desirability bias. In the post–civil rights era, whites are less likely to publicly express racially based feelings and viewpoints and tend to respond to quantitative surveys by choosing the “correct” answer, or one that fits their color-blind belief in a currently racially just world. Furthermore, Bonilla-Silva (2014) questions whether quantitative research is able to capture the ways that people tend to articulate, justify, and rationalize the racial viewpoints that exist under color-blindness. Despite these limitations, Bonilla-Silva (2014:12) does acknowledge that well-designed surveys can still be useful tools for measuring modern issues of race and racism. In another piece, Bonilla-Silva and Dietrich (2011) state that the Color-Blind Racial Attitudes Scale (CoBRAS) scale used in this study has been found to be correlated with a variety of measures of racial prejudice, including whites’ fears of other races. In addition, as long as the effects of color-blindness on survey results do not systematically lessen over time, it should not undercut our results as we are less interested in the absolute level of color-blind racism but, rather, changes over time.

4. As an anonymous reviewer noted, on Items 2 and possibly 3, depending on how respondents interpret the terms major (Item 2) or very (Item 3), the most extreme choice might not be the one that is most “right.” Although possible in some cases, the consistently high alphas (always .80 or greater) suggest that this is not likely to be a major concern.

5. As noted earlier, self-identified white students comprised 76 percent of the students in the class, which made it likely to have some all white groups but no
groups consisting of all nonwhite students. This limits our analysis as we are unable to analyze changes in racial attitudes among minority students who discussed these issues in class without white students present. Given the state of racial segregation in the United States, this is not a major limitation as it is likely that these students have had ample opportunity to only interact with their fellow racial peers.

Ideally, we would have liked to check changes in other attitudes, but the only other question included in all three waves was on gender inequality (Do you agree or disagree with this statement?: Women should take care of running their homes and leave running the country up to men). There were 12 comparisons on this question (Wave 1 vs. Wave 2, Wave 1 vs. Wave 3, and Wave 2 vs. Wave 3, each for whites, nonwhites, whites in an all white group, and whites in a mixed race group). There was one significant difference: Whites in a racially homogeneous group increasingly disagreed with this statement between Wave 1 (mean = 2.91) and Wave 3 (mean = 3.12). Thus, there were no Wave 1 to Wave 2 or Wave 2 to Wave 3 changes. We also asked four questions on economic inequality but unfortunately only asked them in Waves 1 and Waves 3. On a 5-point scale, ranging from essential to not important at all, students were asked how important each of these were for getting ahead in life: “coming from a wealthy family,” “hard work,” “having well-educated parents,” and “having a good education yourself.” There were 16 comparisons (4 questions, Wave 1 vs. Wave 3, for whites, nonwhites, whites in an all white group, and whites in a mixed race group). There were two significant differences, both on the importance of one’s own education: whites (overall) (means increased from 1.45 to 1.62) and whites in a mixed race group (1.48 to 1.76). Based on this, we found 3 of 28 significant differences, which is slightly more than chance. Racial attitudes only changed between Waves 1 and 2, and it is hard to know exactly why without more questions to consider. It may be that the racial diversity of the class prompted more awareness of race. Outside of the structured interaction in this class, it is probably not a stretch to suggest that men and women were more likely to interact with each other than were students of different races. Thus, the very fact of having racial interactions may have sensitized students to racial issues more than gender ones. In a way, the Wave 2 to Wave 3 changes in racial attitudes in the mixed race group and not in the all white group may underscore this interpretation.

We thank an anonymous reviewer for alerting us to this study.

REFERENCES


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