TEACHING ABOUT RACE AND ETHNICITY: A MESSAGE OF DESPAIR, OR A MESSAGE OF HOPE?

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There are strong ethical, moral and political implications to teaching a course on race and ethnicity. Many of us hope our students will become concerned with the monster of racism. We hope they will choose to struggle against the monster. We hope our course will change their lives in a positive way. Yet sometimes our courses seem to produce just the opposite effect. Instead of becoming eager to do something about racism, students sometimes become apathetic, cynical, or demoralized. When this happens, we may be unwittingly contributing to the persistence of racism. Why does this happen?

The political and economic climate of the 1990's is partly to blame. Economic restructuring has led to insecurity in middle and working class communities. Politicians have promoted scapegoating of racial and ethnic minorities. Fascist movements advocating racial hatred and violence have been growing worldwide. The Civil Rights gains of earlier years have been eroded. In black communities, writes Cornel West (1993:12-13), there is “a profound sense of psychological depression, personal worthlessness, and social despair.” Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that some students are pessimistic and apathetic. Until movements for change succeed in gaining momentum, these negative forces will continue to foster attitudes of despair.

However, we should not let our teaching off the hook. Can the way we teach be part of the problem? I believe it is. One issue I suggest we examine is that we may be teaching our students too much about structures of domination, and too little about processes of resistance and change. Knowledge of the ugly depths and staying power of racism is a necessary and painful awakening for most students, whose prior education and upbringing have left them in ignorance or denial. If they lack an equivalent knowledge about the possibilities for change, students may become overwhelmed and fearful as they internalize this new knowledge. Rather than desiring to work for change, they conclude, “nothing can be done, the power structures are just too strong.” Sadly, the students who conclude this are often those who need change the most, i.e. the students of color and low income students who are looking up at American society from the bottom of the well.

In the fall of 1994, I first began thinking about this issue while teaching my 200-level “Sociology of Minorities” class. The catalyst was a young African-American student who nearly burst into tears one day in class as we were discussing a chapter in the textbook. She said, “I'm so sick and tired of sociology. We always hear about how bad things are, why don't we ever talk about anything good? I feel so bad about myself.” In the ensuing discussion, other students from various ethnic backgrounds agreed with her. Others defended sociology. They said, “this is the harsh reality, we've got to face it up to it.” I was disquieted. I did not want to do what the first student was asking, i.e. teaching an inspirational course about the role which great heroes and heroines of color played in building American society. I did not want to teach a course that overlooked the social realities of domination and subordination. However, I realized I could no
longer go on with “business as usual.” I had to take a critical look at the cumulative message my course was sending to students. As I reviewed the course textbooks, the classroom experiences, and the assignments, I became uncomfortably aware that I was indeed sending out a message of despair. As I examined the situation further, I discovered my course was all too typical. It is no accident I was sending out this message; it seemed embedded in the field itself and the contexts in which we teach.

In the following, I will discuss in detail ways in which a message of despair seems to be embedded in our courses. In addition, I will describe some simple steps I have taken to change my own course, steps which seem to be working successfully to balance an understanding of the realities of domination with an understanding of the realities of resistance and change.

THE MESSAGE OF DESPAIR

Curriculum: Textbooks and the Theme of Domination

Since many of us use textbooks, their content have an important impact on curriculum. I did content analysis of ten popular race and ethnicity textbooks. Most textbooks, if not all, focus primarily on the structures and processes of domination. On average, 85% of the pages in these texts were devoted to the subject of domination. The domination focus characterized even texts in the conflict perspective, which presumably would emphasize struggle and change. Trends and social movements working to eliminate racism were treated in only a secondary way in the otherwise excellent texts in the conflict perspective by Marger (1994) and Feagin and Feagin (1996). In a 607 page book, Marger devoted only 69 pages to change (11%). Feagin and Feagin, in a 512 page book, devote 63 pages (12.3%). In most texts, the quality of coverage on change also left something to be desired. I found little systematic inquiry into the dynamics of struggle between dominant and subordinate groups, and the causes of subordinate group success or failure.

There were two exceptions to the overall pattern. Ringer and Lawless (1989) incorporated the theme of struggle into their overall conceptual framework, and returned to it again and again. This text also had the highest percentage of pages devoted to this theme (29.9%). Jaret (1995) contained an excellent 83 page final chapter on “struggles against racism,” which was an in-depth description and evaluation of an exhaustive list of efforts at change.

The Hidden Curriculum: Institutional Racism

Many of us teach in settings characterized by institutional racism, i.e. patterns of inequality built into the culture and structure of the institution. Institutional racism today is sometimes unintentional, subtle or indirect as compared to the blatant discrimination of the past. Many colleges and universities are permeated with this kind of unintentional institutional racism. Despite affirmative action and mission statements endorsing multiculturalism, many institutions
may have a largely white teaching staff and student body which do not reflect the growing racial and ethnic diversity in the United States. They may have an institutional culture discouraging efforts to promote diversity except on a token level. Their bookstores may be filled with textbooks and teaching materials written by whites. Even in sociology courses on race and ethnicity, many of the best-selling texts are written by whites (although they may discuss the research and theories of sociologists of color). It is still possible for a student to go through college without ever encountering in person or in writing an expert who is not white. In such institutions, there is a definite hidden curriculum. The students’ daily experiences are teaching them that whites are the most deserving of a higher education; and science and scholarship are mainly the work of white people.

In this context, courses on race and ethnicity may unintentionally mirror and reinforce the students’ daily experiences of white domination. If courses are taught by white instructors, using insensitive textbooks written by whites which only focus on negative aspects of race and ethnicity, it is likely some students will conclude nothing can be done about racism. No matter how well meaning the teacher, no matter how effectively the teacher exposes the inhumanity of racism, the students cannot help but notice the social realities and draw their own conclusions. If the experts on race and ethnicity have made such little progress against institutional racism, how can the average citizen be expected to do so?

Students of the 1990’s

Today, many students tend to think of social movements and social change as something alien, i.e. something other people do or people did in the past. Most students have never participated in a movement to change society. In fact, many younger students have never tried to change their own behavior or the behavior of family members and friends. Whatever knowledge they have of social movements and social change is based on distortions learned in high school or from TV and movies. As Loewen (1995) has demonstrated in Lies My Teacher Told Me, an eye-opening book analyzing high school history textbooks, the textbooks omit the role of social movements of minorities, workers, and the poor in bringing about social change. Change is depicted either as the work of a benevolent government or as the result of automatic progress. With an incessant barrage of propaganda from politicians, the media, and employers that we live in the best of all possible worlds, the mis-education and ignorance of the younger students have been further reinforced by growing up in the 1980’s and 1990’s.

To make matters worse, both white and minority students, like most Americans, tend to be unaware of the long history of interracial cooperation in struggles against racism in the United States (Thomas:1996). White people lack historical role models of whites who were anti-racist. Minority group members may believe they have no allies in the white community, contributing to their sense of pessimism about change (Marable:1994).

The students’ alienation from social movements makes it all the more likely that they will pick up on the aspects of the curriculum that send out a message of despair. They lack the
educational and life experiences to be able to construct a message of hope that will fill in the gap in our curriculum.

**A MESSAGE OF HOPE**

What follows are some suggestions for integrating a message of hope into the curriculum. They are simple changes in the course outline, readings, assignments and classroom experiences. I have found them to have a cumulative impact on my students’ perspective. They alter both the overt and the hidden curriculum.

*Course Outline:*

The most basic step is to simply make room for a message of hope in the course outline. Here are some brief examples of what happened when I began to try to do this. First, I began to look at sociological theories about racism in a new light. My course begins in a typical way by considering sociological concepts and theories about racism. When I paid more attention to the subject of resistance, I realized that many of the important theories about racism are much better at explaining domination than resistance, including the important issue of interracial alliances against racism. This point needs to be part of the evaluation of the theories. Many sociological theories imply all whites are racist, or all human beings are racist, given the chance.; and thus, the theories cannot account very well for why some members of the dominant group may become anti-racist, e.g. primordial theories, ecological theories. In contrast, other theories, such as those influenced by Marxism, deal in more depth with social change, and the grounds for interracial cooperation. In the Marxist perspective, racism needs to be understood in the context of class struggle between the capitalist class and the working class. Ultimately, racism benefits only the capitalist class, because it undermines the unity of the working class needed to win better conditions. As a result, working class whites have a material stake in allying themselves with minorities against racism. This is an especially timely theory to explore with students in this era of economic restructuring, scapegoating, and the growth of multiracial and even cross-border labor and community alliances. (For an overview of the Marxist analysis of racism, see Knapp and Spector:1991:131-38.)

It also seems necessary to go beyond the theories typically considered in the race and ethnicity textbooks to include theories from other fields, such as social movements and political economy of the world system. Resource mobilization theory is very helpful in understanding social movements against racism (Zald and McCarthy:1987). Theories about “antisystemic movements” in the world system are also helpful in understanding struggles against racism (Wallerstein:1988, Arrighi, Hopkins and Wallerstein: 1989).

Second, I began to look at the history of racism in a new light. One section of my course examines the historical patterns of racism in the development of the modern world system. I deal first with racism accompanying Europe’s incorporation of non-European peoples into the emerging capitalist world economy; and then with fascism, as an example of racism in the industrialized core nations. When I paid more attention to resistance, I realized that sociologists have focused much more on the establishment and maintenance of colonialism and fascism than they have on the
struggles against them. I had been using as case studies some of the worst nightmares of modern race relations—South Africa, and fascist Europe of the 1930’s and 1940’s. Much more analysis is available of the mechanics of apartheid and the rise of fascism than of the rise of the resistance movements against them. Yet, the emergence and ultimate triumph of the resistance movements is remarkable—all the more so given the overwhelming odds against them. How this happened deserves systematic attention in courses on race and ethnicity. These two cases are also interesting theoretically in terms of the class dynamics involved. The case of European fascism illustrates both the disastrous consequences of working people allying themselves with the upper class at the expense of minorities and other nations; and the beneficial consequences of interracial and international cooperation against racism. (See Mayer:1990:3-35 on socioeconomic crisis, class alliances, and the emergence of early twentieth century fascism in Europe.)

*Readings on change:*

I supplemented the textbook with a reading list of books related to contemporary social movements against racism. I give the students a number of options to choose. They are able to read something that speaks clearly to their personal questions and concerns. My list emphasizes writings by minority intellectuals active in the United States civil rights community or international liberation movements (e.g. West:1993, Bell:1992, hooks:1981, Marable:1992, Davis:1981, Kwong:1987, Jaimes:1992, Mandela:1995), and writings from the growing grassroots movement centered in churches and schools, which asks white people to recognize their responsibility for racism as a “white problem” and to join with minorities in movements for change (e.g. Barndt:19911 Rutstein:1993, Paley:1989). Writings such as these by educated people who are also activists are helpful, not only because they make students aware of the existence of contemporary movements, but also because they make students think about the purpose of a higher education about racism, i.e. is it something to put on the shelf, or does it inspire a personal responsibility to work for change?

As I rearranged the course to make room for a message of hope, I also rethought student assignments and the use of classroom time.

**Assignments Fostering Action and Reflection**

*“Action Steps”*

As part of the students’ class participation grade, I require them to do several “action steps” over the course of the semester. I give the students many choices, assigning, as a guide, the little book by Clyde W. Ford, *We Can All Get Along* (1994). This is a rich resource, divided into sections on the self, family, community, nation, and world. It is important to have many choices available, so that no student is forced into doing something they are personally uncomfortable with. My students write a brief, one page report on each of their “action steps,” and also discuss their experiences in small groups during the class.

This semester, my students did an amazing variety of things they otherwise would not
have done: read multicultural books to their children or younger siblings; created a "family vision" for ending racism; interviewed local police chiefs, hospital administrators and school principals regarding institutional racism; investigated their own workplaces; attended church services of a different ethnic group; discussed racism with parents or spouses, etc. I find that almost anything a student chooses to do will give them some insight into the possibilities of change. The small group discussions also begin to create a mini-community in the classroom which reinforces the notion that change is possible. Another benefit of this approach is that it tends to head off some of the defensive hostility of white students who do not like to hear about white racism. In taking some steps towards being part of the solution, they are better able to separate themselves as individuals from the dominant group power structure.

"Before and after statements":

I further focus the students' attention on change by asking them to write a statement at the outset of the course on solutions to the problem of racism, and again, later in the semester. At the very beginning of the course, before they have read any of the readings, and before any regular lectures have been given, I ask them to answer in one page or less the following questions: "What causes racism? Is racism still a problem in the U.S.? What are some of the most effective solutions to the problem of racism?" Later in the course I ask them to return to their initial statement and reflect on whether and how their views have changed as a result of what they have been learning in the course. This assignment also counts as part of the students' class participation grade. I find this assignment definitely increases the students' attention to the subject of change, and also, happily, to questions of theory that otherwise usually fail to capture their imagination.

Experiences in the Classroom

Speakers from the community:

Not surprisingly, many students have never interacted face to face with people who could be role models for participating in social change. I bring in speakers several times over the course of the semester, usually activists from each of the major minority groups represented in the population in the area in which I teach (African-Americans, Latinos and Asian-Americans). In a matter of fact way, and with a sense of humor usually lacking in sociological writing, guest speakers can do much to dispel stereotypes and get students to see that real people are struggling for change right here in our own community. In the last few years, I have developed a list of regular speakers who understand my goal of bringing change and struggle into the curriculum, and have been very interested in preparing their remarks accordingly. One of the high points in my class this semester was when a speaker from a local advocacy group turned on a transistor radio so that the students could hear an apology by a local DJ for racist slurs he had made against one of the minority communities. The apology was being broadcast periodically that week as a result of negotiations between the advocacy group and the manager of the radio station.
Some teachers may feel there is not enough time in a semester to spend valuable class time on the views of people who are not sociologists. If an important aim is for the students to understand change and not come away cynical and despairing, then, I believe the time “lost” is more than made up for by lessening the students' alienation from the topic.

Rethinking the video collection:

Videos are powerful tools. Particularly in a course on race and ethnicity, “a picture is worth a thousand words.” As I rethought the videos I was using, I realized they, too, are often slanted towards the theme of domination rather than resistance. Precisely because videos are so powerful, I re-evaluated my use of them to bring in more balance. Now, for example, if I show the classic “Last Grave at Dimbaza,” about the structures of apartheid, I will also show “Generations of Resistance,” a history of the social movements that culminated in the victory over apartheid.

The above suggestions cannot, of course, completely obviate student attitudes of despair or apathy. It would be surprising if they did, given that we live in a profoundly racist society and world. However, I believe that students now come away from my course knowing that resistance is possible, and that any one of us can make a difference.
FOOTNOTES

1 I have used the idea of a “message of despair” vs. a “message of hope” throughout this paper, rather than what might be considered more neutral sociological concepts such as stability and change. There are two reasons for this. First, I want to call attention to the value implications of typical courses on race and ethnicity. These courses are not value neutral. They point in the direction of a certain kind of social change—humanistic and liberating. In my experience, most of the students notice this right away, whether we make it explicit or not. Second, in the idea of “despair,” I have been influenced by the writings of Cornel West on the strategic importance of cultural, as well as structural change. West argued in Race Matters (1993) that social movements against racism need to tackle head-on the cultural climate of “nihilism” pervading black communities, as well as (or at the same time as) confronting racist economic and political structures. Although white middle and working class communities are not pervaded with exactly the same kind of nihilism West suggests exists in inner-city black communities, I believe there is a parallel culture of despair among whites which must also change if they are to become allies of minorities in movements against racism. Interestingly, for both black and white Americans, this may mean reclaiming a spirit once present in the past. West notes that the culture of black America has not always been nihilistic—in fact, in the face of slavery, there was a strong culture of love, meaning, hope and service that remains inspirational. The same seems to me to be true of white communities, for example, if we think of the cultures of the labor movement of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the anti-war and New Left movements of the 1960’s. Interestingly, white activists in various movements today have recently commented that they are negatively affected by a cultural climate of despair; see, for example, Rose (1995:429-33) on school reform, and Gitlin (1995:235-37) on the Left.

2 I chose ten textbooks currently in use, and counted the number of pages in each devoted to trends and efforts to bring about positive change for racial/ethnic minorities. This included trends, social movements and other forms of resistance (e.g. riots), and other efforts at solutions to racism (e.g. sensitivity training, multicultural education, etc.). I did not include pages devoted to theoretical discussion, unless the treatment of minority responses within this was extensive. White ethnic group struggles against dominant group racism historically were counted, but not the contemporary backlash against people of color. Listed below are the texts I analyzed and the percentage of the pages devoted to the theme of change. Please note that the percentages should not be used to compare these texts with one another, as it was difficult to come up with absolutely clear-cut criteria for categorization. The figures should be taken primarily as indicative of the situation that these textbooks, in general, place change in a secondary place to structures of domination.

Aguirre and Turner: 4.4%
Farley: 22%
Feagin and Feagin: 12.3%
Healey: 11%
Jaret: 12.9%
McLemore: 16.6%
Marden, Meyer and Engel: 24%
Marger: 11%
Ringer and Lawless: 29.9%
Schaefer: 9%

Note: I did not include in this analysis textbooks dealing with the intersection of race/ethnicity with class and gender, because my concern is with the classic course focusing primarily on race/ethnicity. However, a number of such texts now exist, and instructors interested in emphasizing change may want to consider them (Rothenberg:1992, Andersen and Collins:1992, Cyrus: 1993, Rosenblum and Travis:1996). The first three contain final sections on change, and also a good number of first person accounts, which bring in more of a concern with change than the typical textbook.

3For analysis of paradigms and structures used by textbooks and courses on race and ethnicity, see Niemonen (1993) and Downey and Torrecilha (1994).

4There are several networks of educators which I have found to be useful sources of information on change-oriented written and audiovisual materials: the Network of Educators on the Americas, Rethinking Schools, and Nommo. Other good sources of information are civil rights and adult education organizations, especially the Southern Poverty Law Center, the Anti-Defamation League, and the Study Circles Resources Center.

5Excellent documentaries are available on the history of racial/ethnic movements in the United States. For example, the classic series, “Eyes on the Prize,” documenting the history of the civil rights movement, is available from PBS Video. PBS Video also distributes a number of videos on Native American history, many of which cover Native resistance. “Chicanos!” is a recent documentary on Mexican-American movements of the 1960's, and is available from NLCC Educational Media. The Southern Poverty Law Center’s one-half hour documentary, “A Time for Justice,” covers the history of the civil rights movement from the perspective of activists in today’s civil rights community. There are a number of video distributors with materials on racial/ethnic movements in other parts of the world, e.g.: Filmmaker’s Library; New Day, Resolution Inc.; California Newsreel; and Bullfrog Films. The American Friends Service Committee in Cambridge, Massachusetts has an excellent video rental library, including many documentaries on global issues. Information on videos used in an interesting humanities course on Third World development may be found in Keesey:1993. Finally, local peace groups should not be overlooked as sources of videos on international movements. For example, I obtained several documentaries on the Zapatistas from activists who had traveled to a conference in Chiapas.
REFERENCES


