

The Impact of Racial Diversity in the Classroom: Activating the Sociological Imagination

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Abstract

Diverse college campuses have been conclusively associated with a variety of positive outcomes for all students. However, we still know very little empirically about how student diversity directly impacts the core task of the university: classroom learning. While students vary based on race along a broad spectrum of experiences and backgrounds, we have yet to establish how those varying backgrounds might impact the ways students engage with course material. In this study, I examined student journals in order to understand how race influenced the ways students engaged with course material and found that black students are much more likely than their white student peers to find connections between course material and daily life, a central task of the sociological imagination. The results of these findings are important for sociologists in particular and educators in general as we seek to maximize the effects of increasingly diverse educational settings.

Keywords

diversity, sociological imagination, race and ethnicity, religion

Research assessing the impact of racial diversity on college campuses has firmly established that students from different racial backgrounds bring different life experiences and understandings with them to college campuses (Desmond and Emirbayer 2010; Feagin, Vera, and Imani 1996; Omi and Winant 1994; Orfield and Lee 2005). Black students and white students have divergent viewpoints on a variety of issues, including free speech, the death penalty, drug testing, consumer protection, and the prevalence of discrimination in society (Chang 2002). Even when they have similar experiences, race impacts their perceptions, leading students to interpret similar events in differing ways (Fraser and Kick 2000; Pager and Shepherd 2008; Taylor and Mateyka 2011; Wells et al. 2009). Indeed, research shows that white and black students even learn to value distinct communication and learning styles (Gadzella, Masten, and Huang 1999; Gay 2000; Rovai, Gallien, and Wighting 2005).

Given this body of research, it is reasonable to expect that this will impact the way students engage with course material. Existing research has largely focused on showing how a diverse student body results in a more diverse collection of thoughts, ideas, and opinions (Sleeter and Grant 1994). However, very little work has been done to examine empirically whether and to what extent these diverse student backgrounds impact students in the classroom.

Chang (1999:379) noticed this same deficiency, remarking that “a major shortcoming of the existing body of evidence is that it fails to directly address the impact of a racially diverse student

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population on student experiences.” Pascarella (2006) reminds us that there is still much to be done in this area despite nearly a decade having passed since Chang’s (1999) acknowledgment. He calls on researchers to uncover the causal processes that have been consistently found linking campus diversity and positive outcomes.

If we in the social sciences have done a good job of demonstrating that race matters in determining life experiences, we have done a relatively poor job of evaluating these dynamics inside the classroom. In this article, I assess how race impacts the ways students interact with course material. Given the significance of race as outlined earlier, I hypothesize that student race will be a significant factor in determining how students understand and make sense of theories and concepts in the classroom.

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

Researchers have consistently demonstrated the positive effects of diverse campuses on outcomes ranging from retention and satisfaction (Astin 1993; Chang 1999; Umbach and Kuh 2006), cultural awareness (Chang 2002; Pike 2002), intellectual motivation and engagement (Gurin et al. 2002; Maruyama and Moreno 2000), ability to solve problems and evaluate arguments (Antonio et al. 2004; Pascarella et al. 2001; Terenzini et al. 2001), intellectual and personal self-confidence (Hu and Kuh 2003), and ability to integrate multiple perspectives (Marin 2000; Pike, Kuh, and Gonyea 2007). In other words, there is evidence that the positive effects of diversity are felt as students interact with one another in a formal setting, such as a classroom, where they exchange ideas and engage with course material. However, we still know very little about exactly how this happens. Given its importance, it is imperative that we understand what experiences and skills students bring to the classroom in order to maximize student learning.

Previous research demonstrates that the presence of a racially diverse group of students is a necessary but insufficient condition for producing positive effects, noting that diversity must be actively attended to or “activated” order to realize potential positive effects (Chang 1999; Chang et al. 2006; Gurin et al. 2002; Nagda, Kim, and Truelove 2004; Pitt and Packard 2012). Activating diversity means that mechanisms must be put into place (e.g.,

student organizations that promote diversity, racially integrated housing, a racially diverse curriculum) to capitalize on the presence of a racially diverse student body (Gurin et al. 2002). The efforts to activate diversity in the classroom specifically are curriculum based and require students to take courses or attend workshops explicitly designed to bring them into interactions with their peers (Astin 1993; Chang 2002; Nagda et al. 2004; Springer et al. 1996).

Unfortunately, classroom diversity research lacks empirical evidence about how race impacts student understanding of course material. In her examination of the effects of diversity in the classroom, Marin (2000) systematically looked at classroom dynamics and developed a model for maximizing the positive effects of diversity. However, she admits that this model still posits the classroom as a “black box” where the effects of diversity can be measured but have not yet been fully understood (Marin 2000:71).

Pitt and Packard (2012) do much to remedy this situation by offering an empirical examination of how race determines student contributions to course discussion. In a content analysis of student discussions, they find that students’ race fundamentally impacts the kinds of things they say in class discussions. Diverse classrooms, they conclude, “leverage the differences in life experiences” that students bring to the classroom due to their different life experiences (Pitt and Packard 2012:313). Their research offers scholars interested in dynamics of racial diversity in the classroom a good starting place for empirically assessing other aspects of this line of thought.

This article extends the classroom emphasis in Pitt and Packard (2012) and focuses on student interactions with curricular content rather than on interpersonal student interactions. This conceptual model allows researchers to isolate, as much as possible, how the effects of diversity are manifested in the lives of students. An accurate understanding of the dynamics of diversity allows educators and administrators to cultivate positive outcomes from racially diverse classrooms.

METHODS

Students in two courses, Race and Ethnic Relations and Sociology of Religion, were required to keep

weekly journals related to the course, and a sample of these entries was generated for analysis. These two courses were selected because these topics are natural pairs, providing a broad spectrum of social organization (Hartmann et al. 2011; Pitt and Packard 2012). Both of these courses are taught at a midsize (approximately 6,000 undergraduate students and 150 sociology majors and minors), state-supported university in the southern United States where nearly 37 percent of students are non-white. Both classes are at the same academic level, requiring Introductory Sociology in order to enroll, and are usually composed entirely of sociology majors or minors. Aside from the journals, students were also graded on class participation, three written exams, and a presentation. Students in the sections mirrored the demographics of the major, with 63 percent female and 37 percent male and an average age of 21.¹

The tradition of using student journals is well established in sociology and has been a useful way to understand and assess the connections students are making between course material and life experiences (Fisher 1996; Kane 2009; Wagenaar 1984). Indeed, research in other disciplines supports the conclusion that student journals foster critical thinking and reflection (Bolin, Khramtsova, and Saarnio 2005; Callister 1993; Pavlovich 2007).

Journal entries were most often unstructured, but a few times during the semester I required students to write about a particular experience or topic (e.g., see the appendix for full instructions). This freedom allowed students to choose particular aspects of the course that resonated most with them or that sparked their interest. In general, journal entries served as an extension of class discussions, focusing on things that the student either did not say during class or as a way of explaining something from his or her life outside of the classroom in terms of the concepts discussed within the class.

Of the nearly 750 total entries, 120 entries were randomly selected from each of three racial categories (i.e., white, black, and other, as provided by students' institutional data) across four Race and Ethnic Relations sections and four Sociology of Religion courses. Within each section, 15 entries were selected at random from each of the three racial categories for a total of 360 analyzed entries.

The focus here is on the difference between white and black student journal entries ($N = 240$).² Although the racial category "other" was not significant in any of the tests run, this should not be taken to mean that that particular finding is unimportant.³ Further research may well reveal significant differences and/or nondifferences with regard to these populations as well.

Entries were coded according to the learning priorities of the author, which were intended to represent "best-practice" learning outcomes in sociology (Persell, Pfeiffer, and Syed 2008; Pitt and Packard 2012). For the analysis of the race-course journals, the variables covered five major areas: intersections of race with some other key sociological category or institution; mentions of particular racial institutions, groups, or individuals; the invocation of supplementary materials (e.g., news stories, course readings); personal/secondhand experiences with race; and utilization of course material. For the religion course, similar broad categories were used, substituting religion for race where appropriate. Journal entries were not limited to one code and often contained two or more of the identified learning objectives. The following analysis is the result of chi-square tests for significance, which were used to reveal quantitative differences in the data set. Additionally, various concepts are illustrated with selective qualitative examples.

RESULTS

This research supports the hypothesis that students with different racial backgrounds will engage course material in significantly different ways. In order to keep the findings clear, I first discuss the data from the sections of Race and Ethnic Relations (Table 1) before focusing on the relevant differences and additions brought to bear by an analysis of the data from the Sociology of Religion sections (Table 2). Finally, I note the trends and significant findings from combining the two courses (Table 3).

Sociological Categories and Institutions

I sought to determine the extent to which students integrated sociological categories in the context of their specific journal entries. Looking at the specific entries for both races, the data show that nearly all of

Table 1. Mentions of Learning Objectives in Journals in Race and Ethnicity Courses.

	Whites		Blacks		Test Value	Significance
	Yes	No	Yes	No		
Intersections with key sociological categories						
Intersections with class, gender, or sexual orientation	19	41	5	55	10.208	.001***
Intersections with primary relationships (e.g., family)	2	58	3	57	.209	.648
Intersections with secondary institutions (e.g., schools)	24	36	22	38	.141	.707
Mentions of racial cultural institutions or racial/ethnic groups						
An ethnic holiday, organization, or institution	0	60	7	53	7.434	.006**
Races other than black or white	5	55	16	44	6.984	.008**
White ethnics (e.g., Italians)	7	53	1	59	4.821	.028*
Invocation of supplementary materials						
Links to news story or blogs	3	57	2	58	.209	.648
Media depiction of race or racism	4	56	6	54	.436	.509
Discussions in other courses	0	60	4	56	4.138	.042*
Experiences with race/racism						
Secondhand experiences with racism	12	48	3	57	6.171	.013*
Personal experience with racism	10	50	27	33	11.293	.001***
Anger or other emotion about race	2	58	9	51	4.904	.027*
Course connections						
Mention of social theory/theorists	5	55	16	44	6.984	.008**
Reference to course material/readings	7	53	9	51	.288	.591
Use of particular course materials/readings	15	45	12	48	.430	.512

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

the contributions in this category deal specifically with social class. However, white students were significantly more likely to connect course material with social class. In fact, over one fourth of all white students wrote about this intersection in Race and Ethnic Relations. Most entries dealt with the perceived lack of justice concerning class inequality. For example, Erica, a white student, wrote,

My school tuition amounts to around eighty thousand dollars. . . . Most lower class races

have a lower chance of even getting in college, let alone paying for college to obtain a better requirement for better jobs. I know I worked hard with the opportunities given to me, but it doesn't seem right that other people can't have an education because their families don't have eighty thousand dollars. I mean, how is that cycle ever supposed to end?

When black students wrote about social class, they wrote about it in the same terms, discussing

Table 2. Mentions of Learning Objectives in Journals in Sociology of Religion Courses.

	Whites		Blacks		Test Value	Significance
	Yes	No	Yes	No		
Intersections with key sociological categories						
Intersections with class, gender, or sexual orientation	17	43	12	48	1.182	.277
Intersections with primary relationships (e.g., family)	8	52	6	54	.483	.487
Intersections with secondary institutions (e.g., schools)	36	24	34	26	.075	.784
Mentions of religious institutions or religious groups						
Religious holiday, organization, or institution	8	52	3	57	2.580	.108
Religious traditions other than Protestantism	14	46	25	35	4.728	.030*
Ethnicity and religion	7	53	3	57	1.810	.179
Invocation of supplementary materials						
Links to news story or blogs	7	53	3	57	1.593	.207
Media depiction of religion	5	55	9	51	.928	.335
Discussions in other courses	1	59	5	55	2.346	.126
Experiences with race/racism						
Secondhand experiences with religion	10	50	1	59	8.325	.004**
Personal experience with religion	8	52	32	28	21.849	.000***
Anger or other emotion about religion	7	53	13	47	1.788	.181
Course connections						
Mention of social theory/theorists	14	46	33	27	12.886	.000***
Reference to course material/readings	19	41	18	42	.018	.893
Use of particular course materials/readings	27	33	30	30	.351	.554

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

the inequality present with regards to social class. Although they did not write about the topic as often, the tenor of the entries was the same as white students. Analysis of these entries across races revealed that 21 of the 24 entries that dealt with social class expressed frustration with class arrangements.

However, while students of both races lamented class disparity, black students were much more likely to address issues of social class in a way that

was specifically tied to racism ($\chi^2 = 14.96$, $p < .001$, not shown). Often, this occurred in astute ways that linked personal experience to macro-level social class issues. John, a black student, wrote, "I think the reason why Sunday morning is the most segregated hour in America is because people tend to go to churches near where they live. It's not that our churches are racist, it's that they operate within a racist structure that segregates people." John's comments provide

Table 3. Mentions of Learning Objectives in Journals in Race and Ethnicity and Sociology of Religion Courses.

	Whites		Blacks		Test Value	Significance
	Yes	No	Yes	No		
Intersections with key sociological categories						
Intersections with class, gender, or sexual orientation	36	84	17	103	8.854	.003**
Intersections with primary social relationships (e.g., family)	10	110	9	111	.119	.730
Intersections with a secondary institution (e.g., schools)	60	60	56	64	.202	.653
Mentions of cultural institutions or groups						
An ethnic/religious holiday, organization, or institution	8	112	10	110	.189	.664
“Other” races/religions	19	101	41	79	10.88	.001***
White ethnics/ethnicity and religion	14	106	4	116	6.147	.013*
Invocation of supplementary materials						
Links to news story or blogs	10	110	5	115	1.651	.199
Media depiction of race/racism or religion	9	111	15	105	1.344	.246
Discussions in other courses	1	119	9	111	6.108	.013*
Experiences with race/racism or religion						
Secondhand experiences with racism/religion	22	98	4	116	14.129	.000***
Personal experience with racism/religion	18	102	43	77	13.888	.000***
Anger or other emotion about race/religion	9	111	22	98	5.738	.017*
Course connections						
Mention of social theory/theorists	19	101	49	71	18.659	.000***
Reference to course material/readings	26	94	27	93	.043	.837
Use of particular course materials/readings	42	78	42	78	.001	.974

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

important insight into the differences between black and white students in terms of how they integrate and make sense of course information regarding social class. His entry illustrates the causal linkage with racism that black students are more likely to emphasize while providing a personalized understanding of racism and prejudice, a highly significant finding I discuss in the following.

Groups and Institutions

The second set of objectives focused on cultural groups and institutions. In this section, there are significant differences in all categories. As the sample only included black and white students, it was important to determine whether either group would utilize the viewpoints of other races in their attempt to understand theories and concepts.

These data show that black students were more likely to discuss races other than black or white. Additionally, black students' journal entries that addressed other racial minorities often took an empathetic tone as they frequently identified with other racial minorities in general and Native Americans in particular, such as in this entry from Jill:

I just see it as an equality issue similar to what happened with Native Americans and African Americans. Our country viewed them as a commodity and then an obstacle more than a race or ethnicity. The way Native Americans and Black people have been treated should not provide hope for people of Latin American descent.

Jill connects the experiences of her race to the historical mistreatment of Native Americans and projects a future of inequality for Latin Americans. She draws out the similarities between persecuted minorities in general rather than focusing on the specifics of each group, a key component of the sociological perspective. Additionally, this empathy hints at something further revealed in the rest of the data. Namely, black students are more likely to connect personal experiences and academic concepts.

Again, looking at the ways that white students discussed these same issues reveals important differences. Nearly half of the entries from white students that brought up races other than black and white specifically referenced comments made by minority students in the classroom. In other words, the fact that black students are significantly more likely to bring up this issue should not necessarily indicate a lack of interest on the part of white students. However, it is the case that their entries often took the form of the one by Martin, which suggests that thinking about minority groups other than African Americans was not a common experience:

What was most interesting though was when Brian talked about how, in doing his research about the treatment of the Native Americans in the "New World" he was reminded of the stories his grandfather would tell about growing up in Alabama and seeing people lynched. I had never thought of it that way.

In this entry, Martin reveals that it is not common for him to think about historical events along racial lines. This stands in stark contrast to the previous one by Jill, which focuses on the structural similarities between different groups of people.

This finding is not to suggest that white students bring no diversity into the classroom. White students were much more likely to discuss white ethnic groups. The most common entry in this area was to discuss the transition of different groups of people into legal "white" status such as this entry from James, a white student discussing the intersection of race and class: "[Brodkin] states the idea that by climbing the ranks, Jews are now viewed as white. Many seem to think that whites are more accepting of different races if they achieve middle class and embrace the same ideals as the whites." James illustrates aspects of "diversity" that white students bring to classrooms. Although these benefits are probably only limited to classes where such issues are addressed substantively, it is worth pointing out here that not a single entry from black students addressed the transition into "whiteness."

Further adding to this dynamic is the composition of groups for the classwide project, which requires students to research various aspects of Columbus Day. The groups selecting to research the feelings of Italian Americans and assimilation patterns have been comprised entirely of white students with only two exceptions throughout all of the classes where the project has been assigned.

Supplementary Materials

Although neither group of students was likely to mention outside sources, this is likely attributable to the specific assignment instructions. What we do learn from this group of learning objectives continues the previously described trend. Black students are significantly more likely to make links across courses in their journal entries. Although this result is significant, it was present in only 4 of 60 cases for black students and 0 of 60 for white students. Thus, while there is a significant difference, it is not particularly common for either group to bring up outside resources or supplementary materials.

Experiences with Race and Racism

The last set of topic-based learning objectives concerned students' personal experiences with race. Unsurprisingly, this topic was popular, with 52 of 240 entries containing some experience with either personal or secondhand racism. Also unsurprisingly, this is an area with one of the starkest differences between students of different races. White students were significantly more likely to discuss secondhand experiences with racism that arose from experiences of injustice felt by roommates or friends. Melissa provides a good example of these kinds of entries while articulating a connection between racism and secondary institutions when she writes about her friend:

I have a friend that attends school here who is Black. She went to high school in a small, rural town. Throughout school she made excellent grades. Once she got to college she struggled greatly in all subjects . . . I guess the biggest question is where the responsibility lies. I feel that her lack of good instruction is the first on the list, but I feel there should be a dividing line somewhere. Someone has to break the news that "Everything you thought was correct isn't, and most likely it was racially based."

Melissa's entry is a compelling account connecting her friend's situation to larger social structures. When black students discussed racism, they often did so in similar ways, but they were significantly more likely to report firsthand experiences with racism.

Additionally, black students were more than twice as likely to discuss racial issues with anger. Indeed, this topic revealed some of the most emotional journal entries and highlighted a subtle difference in the way that white students and black students understand racism. Joseph recounts a story about his family and draws important links between the differences in popular opinion and his reality:

When my parents first got married they were on welfare and lived in government housing. They were not drug addicts,

alcoholics, or just plain losers; they simply couldn't make ends meet. Eventually my dad found a job and my family moved out of the projects and got off welfare. The story of my family is similar to that of most families receiving assistance. However, the media does not tell this story.

Joseph's example provides a powerful look into the ways that abstract concepts such as power, ideology, and covert racism have been enacted through his own family. While it is a mistake to understand race as only applying to nonwhite students, it is certainly the case that nonwhite students have a different experience of race in this country.

Looking further into the data, I sought to understand if students wrote about racism in different ways. Importantly, white students were much more likely to explain both secondhand and firsthand accounts of racism as the result of classic bigotry than black students ($\chi^2 = 15.154, p < .001$, results not shown). Black students were much quicker to account for racism not only from a personal standpoint, but also from within an institutional framework, such as this entry about the invisibility of white privilege:

They are taught to not recognize white privilege, but they expect us to ignore it? We as blacks, and many other minorities, recognize it every day in or society because it is constantly being put in our faces. We see how the white dominance is being portrayed in the media, and how they are pretty much treated as a first class citizen above others. And because of that they don't want to see race, especially theirs.

My experiences suggest that these subtle differences do not often come out when students talk to one another. Instead, racism is reduced to overt, one-to-one bigotry that implicitly relieves present company from any responsibility and/or blame. In the relatively private journal entries, however, these viewpoints are much more safely expressed as students need not fear reprisal from their peers. I explicitly instruct students that journals are for them to explore things they might be afraid to address.

However, these views should not lie dormant. Although we should all recognize the risk that non-white students may feel when discussing institutional racism in the classroom, instructors should be working to draw out these viewpoints. It is important for sociology students to understand the connection between personal experiences and course material that emphasizes structural conditions, especially when it is being practiced by their peers. In this way, journal entries become a conversation starter as instructors can capitalize on the trends discussed in the entries to spark conversation.

Course Connections

Lastly, I analyzed how students utilized and integrated course materials in their entries. While the other learning areas are topical and substantive, this area deals more with the mechanisms students use to explain various topics. While both black and white students are about equally as likely to incorporate class readings and materials in their entries, black students were much more likely to make explicit reference to social theory or theorists. Martin's entry illustrates this point well:

To understand race and the racism that plagues our society, you have to comprehend the institutionalization of race within society. Societal acceptance is based on the economic gain, representation, and acceptance into the majority. Racism is not blatant like it used to be, it now lies beneath the surface. It has transformed . . . at one time America was seen as a melting pot. This melting is the minority traditions, and it resolves into assimilation into White culture.

In this smart summation, Martin draws on several strands of theory in order to piece together an understanding of how racism has evolved over time. My investigations of entries from this same week of class by white students indicated that white students were no less interested in understanding the evolution of racism. However, they did so in a different way, often engaging with one particular reading or finding from a reading (e.g., home ownership), rather than choosing to grapple with systems of ideas.

EXTENDING THE FINDINGS TO SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION

There is, obviously, a danger in trying to draw conclusions about the impact of student race in the classroom utilizing only data from a class about race and ethnicity. In order to mitigate this potential conflict, I analyzed entries from an identical journaling assignment across four sections of Sociology of Religion as well. Keeping with the same theoretical framework of learning outcomes discussed earlier, I present the results of these findings here (Table 2), which support the previously described findings.

Sociological Categories and Institutions

As among the sections of Race and Ethnic Relations, I found here that white students more frequently addressed the intersection of religion with issues of class, gender, and sexuality, but the difference loses significance. The other intersections with key sociological variables maintain the relationship displayed in Table 1. What accounts for the propensity of white students to discuss issues of class, gender, and sexuality more relative to their black peers in a class about race as opposed to a class about religion?

While assessing the exact nature of that relationship is beyond the scope of this particular article, the content of the entries here suggest that white students might have been utilizing social class as a proxy for race in their entries for Race and Ethnic Relations, while black students spent more time focusing on issues of race. While the total number of entries by white students in this area stayed more or less constant, the contributions of black students more than doubled in the Sociology of Religion sections.

Groups and Institutions

The only significant relationship observed in student comments about religious groups and institutions is with mentions of non-Protestant forms of religion. Continuing the trend identified among the Race and Ethnic Relations students, contributions from black students were again more likely to reference nondominant groups. While there were no discernible patterns among the ways that students

discussed non-Protestant religious groups, it is important to understand that no students were particularly apt to discuss tribal religions, cults, or other marginalized groups. Instead, their discussions tended to stay within the framework of the dominant world religions (e.g., Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, etc.). However, black students were much more likely to incorporate non-Protestant Christians into their own analysis.

Supplementary Materials

Again, neither group is likely to bring in outside resources. Given that the instructions for the assignments were the same as for the Race and Ethnic Relations course, I think lack of overall contributions in this area is largely accounted for by the details of the assignment. The only category that approaches significance is in the connections to other courses, with black students being more likely to make those connections.

Experiences with Religion

When students wrote about experiences with religion, they did so in ways that were similar to the ways in which they discussed race. Black students were significantly more likely to draw on personal experiences when making their points while white students were more likely to report the experiences of others. Take, for example, these two student entries about basic conflict theory as applied to religion:

Gene (black student): [T]he “other worldly” person believes that when changes happen, we believe that it is in God’s plan for us. We don’t have to see the change, we only have to believe. We don’t fight the change like the worldly person. I know this is not the understanding Marx would advocate for, but I can’t escape it.

Clarence (white student): I can see how Marx would be bothered by the way some people use religion. My roommate sees every trial in his life as a test from God. I’m not a Marxist necessarily but even I can understand how sometimes it is just life happening or people intentionally screwing him over.

My interactions with students in and out of the classroom suggests to me that white students have no fewer opportunities with religion (or race, though they may not realize it) to draw from in their journal entries, but the fact remains that these experiences do not make it into their entries with nearly as much frequency. Whether this is by design or choice is difficult to say. However, the results here are compelling. In other words, the propensity for black students to discuss course material within the framework of their own lived experiences does not seem to be limited to a class about race and ethnicity. Rather, we begin to see a pattern emerging in terms of basic differences in the ways that black and white students approach course material in general.

Course Connections

Students displayed an equal likelihood for utilizing course readings and materials. It is clear that students understood the importance of this aspect in the assignment directions. However, black students again were significantly more likely to incorporate social theory and theorists into their journal entries. The use of theory was primarily an attempt to help explain a situation that the student was struggling to understand. This entry from Wade about religious terrorism is a good example:

Rational choice theory best justifies terrorism. . . . The reason why rational choice theory works best is because obviously a rational choice is made as a response to human need. You can’t really think of them as just crazy people anymore.

The fact that black students are significantly more likely to incorporate social theory should not obscure the fact that white students also make contributions in this area. However, they did not do so with nearly the frequency of their black counterparts.

DISCUSSION

The real power of the data presented here is in the aggregate. Tables 1 and 2 present strong evidence that the trends described earlier are not limited to

one particular course. Table 3 presents these data, which show some general trends. Black students are significantly more likely to discuss minority groups, bring up personal experiences with course topics, discuss anger or other emotions, and make connections to social theory or theorists in their journal entries. Their white counterparts are more likely to discuss the intersections of course topics with class, gender, or sexual orientation and to report secondhand experiences related to course material.

Taking these results as a group, a discernible pattern emerges where black students discuss course material in their journal entries in ways that are autobiographical and yet still connected to social theory, while white students veer more toward abstract, externalized reports that engage larger social institutions. Both of these patterns are present in the data from the individual courses and are strengthened when the results are combined and suggest that students with different racial backgrounds are engaging with the same course materials in vastly different ways.

The connection that black students make between personal experiences and social theory is particularly interesting for those interested in understanding how racial diversity in the classroom impacts the process of student learning as opposed to simply the curricular content. While students of both races are equally likely to refer to course materials, black students are more likely to use social theory in their entries.

When white students discuss theory or social theorists, it most often remains in the abstract, such as this entry by Jeff about institutional racism:

The film we watched about housing discrimination is a good illustration of institutionalized racism, in which Blacks may own a home that is comparable to a White person's home but provides them with fewer assets. This connects with the theme of the article we read which is that, while Black achievements have improved, the wealth gap has gotten worse due to forces beyond individual hatred.

While black students did have similar entries, most of their theoretical discussions were more

applied. Analysis of specific entries from black students utilizing social theory revealed that the approach these students most commonly took when discussing theoretical concepts was to apply them to their own life outside the classroom.

For example, Aaron takes a very applied approach in his journal entry, leading up to a personal account of his uncle being held overnight by police:

This control is manifested in the criminal justice system through differential arrest rates of African Americans, high rates of police brutality in African American communities, and the much greater imposition of the death penalty in cases involving African Americans. Many of my own family members have been arrested or stopped by police for things that I see White people getting away with all the time.

Aaron's and Jeff's quotes highlight the vast difference in terms of how these students understand the concept of institutional racism. Although they are writing about the same topic, institutional discrimination, it is clear that they understand and incorporate the material in starkly different ways. Again, these differences resonate with my own experiences. White students were more likely to express that they were unaware of the ways that racism and discrimination manifest themselves in contemporary society, while minority students tell me they are surprised that these things had never been brought up in a class before considering how common such experiences are in their lives.

When white students discuss issues of inequality, they frequently do so through the lens of social institutions, and often in ways that illustrate a good grasp of abstract concepts. Take, for example, this entry about a class field visit to a Presbyterian Church for Sociology of Religion. Allison, a white student, wrote, "I was not aware that the Presbyterian Church is one of the most liberal denominations . . . I found it interesting that she seemed to avoid the question of gender. I would have thought that she would have known more about the roles of women within the church." Allison makes some good and interesting connections here between the speaker we had visited as a class and larger

religious and social institutional structures. Her ability to categorize Presbyterianism on a scale indicates that she has a developing sense of the religious landscape as a whole, and her interrogation of the speaker's own identity indicates that her intellectual curiosity has depth as well as breadth. The black students were much less likely to discuss intersections in this way in their entries.

Thus, it appears that while white students are making connections between course materials and understanding course concepts presented in the context of the class, black students are making strong theoretical links between academic concepts and lived experiences. This finding gives further shape to the aforementioned results indicating that race plays a prominent role in determining how students engage with course material.

CONCLUSION

In their study analyzing the effect of race on student contributions to course discussion, Pitt and Packard (2012) draw on Kubal et al.'s (2003) concept of the lived experience and conclude that black students are more likely to have their own lives affect their contributions. They find this is among the strongest manifestations of the positive effects of diversity on campus as white students gain exposure to other viewpoints.

These data generally support those findings. The picture that emerges from the previous sections sketches out an outline of black students consistently integrating personal experiences with academic content. The ability to see connections between not only one's own biography and the larger forces of history but also between the larger, macro-level forces affecting different groups of people is a core task of sociology (Mills 1959). The quote from Jill about Native Americans and from Aaron about institutional racism shows how lived experiences are used to understand a course concept at a theoretical level. Importantly, the results from the four sections of *Sociology of Religion* suggest that this ability is a transferable skill. Indeed, as we see earlier, black students are also more likely to make these kinds of connections when discussing religion.

This kind of empathy lies at the heart of the sociological imagination (Dandeneau 2009;

Scanlan and Grauerholz 2009). In order to activate fully the potential of the sociological imagination, Hoop (2009:58–59) argues that we should “connect our examples and assignments to their lived experiences. Tapping into their lived experiences as part of the ‘course text’ should be a consideration in our teaching.” The presence of students in the classroom who are already doing this kind of work should help this task along, as long as instructors recognize this student ability.

The data in the tables show that there are many students who are not engaging in discussions around key learning objectives. Using the journal entries as prompts for class discussion allows for modeling that can be explicitly connected to the journaling assignment. This, when combined with the formal feedback from the first of the three graded journal checks, focuses entries considerably.

Building on the results of this research, instructors would do well to look for those places where students can be encouraged to bring their own experiences into the classroom through the lens of social theory. For example, drawing directly from a trend I noticed in the journal entries about the abstract nature of white students' discussions of racism and the very personal accounts from non-white students, I designed a class around a discussion prompt that required students to write about their most recent raced interaction. In other words, they had to describe the last interaction they had with someone where race played a prominent role. The benefit of having read the journal entries meant that I knew students were already thinking about these things.

While everyone had some way to contribute, the nonwhite students overwhelmingly reported interactions that were much more recent (many had happened earlier that day). First in small groups, and then as a class, students were then required to explain those interactions using some or all of a set of key terms and ideas I had written on the board that we had already discussed as a class. This prompt allowed for a discussion that mirrored the kinds of activity I had seen in the journals and allowed students to see connections between personal events and theory as it was practiced by their peers.

While the data here are compelling, we should continuously remind ourselves that students are

individuals. Second, the connections students make in journal entries might be due, in part, to the format of the assignment. Perhaps it takes longer periods of reflection than are possible in a class discussion, such as some reflective writing or sharing of journal entries as a class.

Further, we should keep in mind that there is evidence that black students are less participative than their white counterparts in course discussions even if the rationale behind these differences are not yet fully understood (Howard, Zoeller, and Pratt 2006; Saufley, Cowan, and Blake 1983). Additionally, white students carry the privileges of being the dominant race with them into the classroom (Warren 2001). Race works not only to the detriment of non-white students in the classroom, but provides an advantage for white students. When white students get more attention or higher grades, it serves to reinforce preconceived culturally based stereotypes.

Failing to attend actively to racial diversity in the classroom is likely to have several unintended consequences. First, black students might not be given credit for their knowledge and analytical skills through formal evaluations (e.g., course participation) or informal evaluations (e.g., impressions on faculty). Second, letting these connections and viewpoints remain silent and unspoken deprives the class of seeing important modeling of the sociological imagination by a peer. Third, failing to be sensitive to these contributions might serve to reinforce notions of white superiority. Educators would do well to minimize these instances by being cognizant of racial dynamics and looking for opportunities to bring in student viewpoints that might otherwise be lacking.

The need to understand how diversity impacts college classrooms has arguably never been greater as higher education in the United States continues to attract a broader base of students who bring with them a variety of life experiences. This diversity has been conclusively demonstrated to be an asset when properly utilized throughout our campuses. This article provides evidence that diversity has the potential to play a positive role in the formal learning environment as well by uncovering the differences in the ways that black and white students engage with course material and integrate their own experiences with theories and concepts presented in the classroom.

APPENDIX

Journal Instructions

The primary assignment for the semester will be a journal. You are to keep a weekly journal documenting your thoughts, experiences, and feelings with respect to the course material. Sometimes you will have writing prompts, but other times you will be on your own. What insights have you had during the past week? What did you think of the readings? Have you experienced something out of class that made you think about the course material? These entries are a place to show that you are engaged with the course material and discussions. The challenge here is to see whether you can go substantially beyond the lectures, discussions, and in-class activities to offer your own unique analyses and insights.

Journal entries should be typed, at least one page long (single spaced, standard margins and font sizes), and be clearly demarcated with dates. Also, do include page numbers. Journals will be graded on relevance, critical thinking, and connections and analysis beyond what is covered in class. You will be asked to turn in your journals three times during the semester.

NOTES

Reviewers for this manuscript were, in alphabetical order, Nancy Berns, Otis Grant, and Morrison Wong.

1. Students in the Race and Ethnic Relations sections were assigned readings from Charles A. Gallagher's *Rethinking the Color Line: Readings in Race and Ethnicity*, 4th ed. (2009), while students in the Sociology of Religion sections were assigned selections from *Religion Matters: What Sociology Teaches Us About Religion in Our World* by Michael O. Emerson, William A. Mirola and Susanne C. Monahan and *Sociology of Religion: A Reader*, edited by Monahan, Mirola, and Emerson, both published in 2011.
2. It is important to keep in mind the contested and constructed nature of race. In particular, students who might fall under the broad umbrella of "blackness" are likely to have differing experiences in America based on origin. While the university does have a number of African and

Caribbean students, none were enrolled in these sections.

3. I do not analyze those results because of the composition of this category. There were not enough students filling out other racial categories for a full analysis of all groups.

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