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**How White Faculty Perceive and React to Difficult Dialogues on Race
: Implications for Education and Training**

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What is This?

How White Faculty Perceive and React to Difficult Dialogues on Race

Implications for Education and Training

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Using consensual qualitative research, the perceptions and reactions of White faculty to classroom dialogues on race were explored. Difficult racial dialogues were characterized by intense emotions in both professors and their students, most notable anxiety, that interfered with the ability to successfully facilitate a learning experience for participants. Among the major obstacles that interfered with teaching competence were fears of revealing personal biases and prejudices, losing classroom control, inability to understand or recognize the causes or dynamics of difficult dialogues, and lack of knowledge and skills to properly intervene. A number of potentially effective teaching strategies were identified: (a) acknowledging emotions and feelings, (b) self-disclosing personal challenges and fears, (c) actively engaging the classroom exchanges, and (d) creating a safe space for racial dialogues.

Keywords: race/ethnicity; dimensions of diversity; methodology; adult populations; academia

The American Psychological Association's multicultural guidelines state explicitly that psychologists are cultural beings and, as such, may hold detrimental attitudes and beliefs toward individuals and groups different

from themselves (American Psychological Association, 2003). Thus, the education and training of psychologists have continued to stress the importance of acquiring racial/cultural awareness, knowledge, and skills in the development of cultural competence (Sue & Sue, 2008). Yet, there are indications that graduate training may be ineffective in dealing with aversive racism, a form of racial bias that is unintentional, subtle, and outside the level of conscious awareness (Dovidio, 2001; Sue et al., 2007). White psychology trainees, for example, often report that their multicultural competence increased with greater levels of training; yet, implicit racial biases (aversive racism) were unaffected and remained present (Boysen & Vogel, 2008). Such findings are disheartening but point to an inescapable conclusion: Cultural competence is more than the acquisition of knowledge and skills and must deal with hidden biases and prejudices (Sue, 2005).

Educators and social scientists believe that one of the best opportunities to ameliorate aversive forms of racism is through constructive dialogues that bridge racial and ethnic divides (President's Initiative on Race, 1998). Classroom interactions present multiple learning opportunities for professors to use racial dialogues to explore hidden biases. When properly and effectively facilitated, racial dialogues have been shown to reduce prejudice, increase compassion, dispel stereotypes, and promote mutual respect and understanding (Willow, 2008; Young, 2004). Yet, honest discussions about race and racism have proved to be a major challenge for most White educators who appear reluctant or ambivalent in addressing these topics with persons of color or even among themselves (Sue, 2005; Young, 2004). Students of color often report that they are prevented from bringing up race topics for fear of negative consequences (i.e., offending fellow students or professors, being isolated or avoided, and risking their chances to obtain good grades and graduate) or by refusals from White classmates to discuss them (Feagin, 2001; Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder, 2008; Willow, 2008; Young, 2004). The avoidance by well-intentioned Whites to address racial topics stifles the voices of people of color whose racial identities are intimately linked to their sense of self-worth (Helms, 1990, 1995). Studies reveal that such unspoken differences and conflicts can lead to hostile and invalidating racially charged campus climates, perpetuate biases and prejudices, have detrimental psychological consequences (e.g., stereotype threat, invalidation of racial realities, and alienation from course curriculum), and contribute to low grades and low graduation rates among students of color (Dovidio, 2001; Salvatore & Shelton, 2007; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Sue, 2003; Watt, 2007; Young & Davis-Russell, 2002).

In the classroom, it has been found that many emotional dialogues on race are triggered by well-intentioned Whites (students and professors)

who unknowingly engage in racial microaggressions, an active form of aversive racism (Sue, Lin, Torino, Capodilupo, & Rivera, 2009). Racial microaggressions are brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities that often unintentionally convey hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights or insults to persons of color (Sue et al., 2007). Studies seem to reveal that most difficult dialogues on race in the classroom are caused by racial microaggressions delivered by well-meaning Whites, including professors, who are unaware of the offensive nature of their actions (Sue et al., 2009; Sue, Rivera, Capodilupo, Lin, & Torino, in press).

Yet, how do we promote and facilitate such dialogues when White educators are unaware of their own biases and find the topic disconcerting and to be avoided (Sue, 2003)? Some scholars believe that White educators perceive racial topics as taboo, discuss them only superficially, and evidence high levels of anxiety that distort their communications (Young, 2004; Young & Davis-Russell, 2002). They are likely to engage in a pattern of defensive maneuvers to dismiss, negate, or avoid racial topics (Watt, 2007). Others speculate that many White professors in psychology and education (a) are fearful that racial dialogue in the classroom will create unnecessary antagonisms between students and/or teachers, (b) are fearful that they may lose control of the classroom situation, and (c) feel helpless and have little faith in their ability to recognize and/or facilitate racially loaded exchanges (Sue & Constantine, 2007; Watt, 2007). Regardless of the reasons, the lack of honest and open conversations on race can have devastating consequences in the classroom when major misunderstandings or racial offenses lie unspoken or untouched (Sue et al., in press).

For the purpose of this study, difficult dialogues constitute classroom conversations about race that are marked by tension, anxiety, and awkwardness and involve fears of being misunderstood and/or misrepresented. They have been conceptualized as a clash of racial realities that is manifest in how Whites tell stories about race and racism and the counternarratives of persons of color (Bell, 2003). It is believed that racial dialogues are difficult for Whites because they (a) highlight major differences in worldview, (b) are challenged publicly, (c) make the person feel at risk for potentially disclosing intimate biased thoughts, beliefs, or feelings related to race, and (d) trigger intense emotional reactions (Bell, 2002; Jackson, 1999; Watt, 2007; Young, 2004). Few empirical studies, however, have attempted to classify the characteristics of a difficult dialogue on race, the emotive reactions that surround such incidents, their psychological meanings, and the outcome of a failed or successful facilitation of the event from the perspective of White educators (Sue et al., in press).

This study attempts to address several important facets of difficult dialogues: (a) What are the characteristics of a racial dialogue that make the dialogues difficult for White faculty? (b) What emotional reactions are experienced by faculty when such dialogues occur and how do they affect the interactions? (c) What intervention strategies have proved successful and unsuccessful in facilitating difficult dialogues on race?

Method

Qualitative methodologies have been successfully used in educational and social science research to examine human phenomena that are not well understood (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Polkinghorne, 2005). To further investigate how White faculty members negotiate difficult dialogues on race in the classroom, this study used Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR; Hill et al., 2005; Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997). CQR involves "open-ended questions in semi-structured data collection (typically in interviews) which allow for acquiring consistent information across individuals as well as providing more in-depth examination of individual experiences" (Hill et al., 2005, p. 196). The method incorporates the use of several judges who come to a consensus about the research findings that limits the imposition of biases by the primary investigator (Hill et al., 2005).

Participants

Participants were White faculty members from a private university located in the Northeastern United States. A total of eight individuals (two men and six women) was interviewed and all of their responses analyzed for this investigation. All participants had doctoral degrees, held the rank of professor, taught courses at the graduate level, were born in the United States, ranged in age from 43 to 68 years, and had 10 to 25 years of teaching experience. The teaching assignments of the volunteers did not specifically deal with race, ethnicity, or multicultural issues.

Six taught in a graduate school of education and two in a school of social work from a common university. A purposive sampling method was used to identify participants: White faculty, experienced at the professor rank, and willing to discuss experiences in facilitating racial dialogues. Using these criteria, the research team developed a list of potential participants, and the primary investigator sent them an e-mail describing the study. The brief description of the study given in the solicitation was similar to the

opening paragraph of the appended interview protocol. A total of nine volunteered, but one withdrew midway through the study for personal reasons. No compensation was provided.

Researchers

The researchers included two PhD-level counseling psychologists: an Asian American man who served as the primary investigator and auditor, and a White American woman who interviewed faculty members. The data analysis team was composed of four doctoral students (one Asian American woman, one Latino American man, and two White American women). Because all team members had prior experience conducting CQR data analysis, minimal CQR training was needed in this study.

CQR involves making clear the expectations and beliefs of team members before data collection, analysis, and interpretation. The purpose is to minimize subjective influence of researcher biases and to maximize the integrity of participant voices (Hill et al., 2005; Hill et al., 1997). Biases and expectations of the data analysis team included beliefs that White faculty members would (a) express limitations in their ability to facilitate difficult dialogues on race, (b) have difficulty recognizing the causes of racial incidents in the classroom, (c) be disinclined to address racial incidents in the class, and (d) feel less capable than faculty of color to handle racial dialogues. Team biases and expectations were frequently revisited to minimize their effect on the data analysis process.

Measures

A brief demographic questionnaire seeking information about participants' race, ethnicity, age, gender, level of occupation, and teaching experience was collected. In addition, a semistructured interview protocol was used (see the appendix). Questions were aimed at understanding what constitutes a difficult dialogue on race in the classroom, generating examples of difficult dialogues, and describing effective techniques for dialogue facilitation.

Procedures

Data collection. Data were collected through the use of face-to-face, semistructured interviews. Interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour, were audiotaped, and were sent for professional transcription.

Audiotapes were kept in a locked cabinet in the primary investigator's office. All identifying information was removed from the transcripts and each was assigned an identification number. Any isolated inaudible statements were not used in the analysis.

Data analysis. The first step in CQR analysis is the identification of domains. Domains are broad topic areas that are used to cluster or group the initial data set (Hill et al., 2005; Hill et al., 1997). Members of the analysis team independently read and developed domains from the semi-structured interview transcripts. After each member developed the domains, the team met to discuss each individual set and worked to consensus until a final set of domains was agreed on. Team members proceeded to identify data blocks from the original transcripts and assigned blocks of text to different domains within each transcript. The research team met until consensus was reached concerning this process of text assignment.

Next, core ideas (abstracts or summary statements) within each domain were identified. Specifically, Hill et al. (1997) describe this process of constructing or abstracting core ideas in the following manner: "The aim of the abstracting process is to capture the essence of what the interviewee has said about the domain in fewer words and with more clarity" (p. 546). The team members independently read all the data within each domain for a given case and constructed core ideas. The team met and discussed the wording of each core idea until consensus was reached. A consensus version for each case was developed, consisting of the core ideas followed by the raw data for each of the domains.

Prior to the cross-analysis, an audit of the core ideas was conducted. According to Hill et al. (1997), the auditor's task at this stage is to check whether the raw material is in the correct domain and that participants' responses are accurately represented in the core ideas. The primary investigator, who was not part of the analysis team, served as the external auditor. The auditor examined the domains and core ideas and provided feedback to the analysis team. The team reviewed the auditor's comments and suggestions and made modifications based on consensus.

Subsequently, a cross-analysis of the data was conducted. Domains and core ideas were compared across the individual transcripts to determine a set of common categories that emerged from the data. The research team took all of the core ideas for each domain across cases and pasted them into a new document. Then, the team examined all the core ideas within domains and determined how these core ideas clustered into various categories. The team revisited the original transcripts again with the new set of categories to investigate whether any important information was overlooked and

identified descriptive quotes for categories. Finally, the team met to discuss the final set of categories and used consensus to resolve discrepancies.

As part of cross-analysis, results are characterized by the frequency of the occurrence of each category. Consistent with CQR, the occurrence of each domain, category, and subcategory was determined by assigning a label of *typical* or *variant*. A label of typical frequency means that the category or subcategory was endorsed by at least half of the cases but not by all of the cases. The label of variant frequency means that the category or subcategory was endorsed by two or three cases (Hill et al., 1997). The research team met and applied this classification scheme to the final set of categories. Again, the external auditor reviewed the cross-analyses to assess whether each core idea fit into the specified category. The team met to discuss the auditor's comments and arrived at consensus with regard to the suggested changes.

Results

Analysis of the interview data revealed six major domains: (a) characteristics, (b) reactions, (c) training experiences, (d) influence of professor's race, (e) facilitation strategies, and (f) failure to recognize difficult dialogues. A summary of the domains, categories, and subcategories with corresponding frequencies can be found in Table 1.

Domain 1: Characteristics of Difficult Dialogues

Two major characteristics emerged that made facilitating racial dialogues difficult: (a) fear of losing classroom control and (b) the dialogues' emotionally charged nature.

Loss of Control of Classroom Dynamics (typical)

Several participants spoke about fearing a loss of control over their classrooms—that the situation would get out of hand and they would not know how to handle the conflict. For example, one female professor expressed concern that she would not know how to maintain order in her classroom: "I think that fear of they're [students] going to get out of control. . . . I won't know what to do. They'll be out of control. I can't control it." Similarly, a male professor shared, "It was a sense of loss of control . . . that I associated with conversations being difficult, and sometimes that loss of control is manifested in students attacking one another in ways that I am uncomfortable with."

Table 1
Summary of Domains, Categories, and Frequencies

Domain	Category and Subcategory	Frequency
Characteristics of	Loss of control of classroom dynamics	Typical
difficult dialogues	Emotionally charged	Typical
Reactions to difficult	Professor's perceptions of student	
dialogues	Emotions	
	Anxiety	Typical
	Anger	Typical
	Defensiveness	Typical
	Sadness	Variant
	Behaviors	
	Crying	Typical
	Student leaves classroom	Variant
	Withdrawn	Typical
	Professor's emotions	
	Anxiety	Typical
	Disappointment	Variant
	Uncertainty	Variant
	Lack of education or training	Typical
Training experiences	Informal training	Variant
	Continuing education	Variant
Influence of professor's	White faculty experiences	
race on difficult	Lack of experience with racism	Typical
dialogues	Lack of knowledge of race and culture	Variant
	Lack of shared identity with students of color	Variant
	Perception of faculty of color's experiences	
	More credibility on topics of race	Variant
Strategies for facilitating	Ineffective strategies	
difficult dialogues	Ignore the difficult dialogue	Variant
	Passively allow students to manage the dialogue	Variant
	Effective strategies	
	Acknowledge emotions	Typical
	Continue difficult dialogue after actual event	Typical
	Create safe space	Variant
	Set precedent about addressing racial issues in class	Variant
	Mandatory participation	Variant
	Instructor admits own personal challenges	Variant
	Increase awareness of racial microaggressions	Variant
Failure to recognize	No experience with difficult dialogues	Variant
difficult dialogues	Not competent to recognize racial microaggressions	Variant

Note: Typical = applicable to at least half of the cases; Variant = applicable to two or three cases.

Emotionally Charged (typical)

The powerful emotional nature of racial dialogues was identified as problematic in getting students to have an open conversation with one another. In addition, many professors believed that their own anxiety and that of students contributed to an emotionally charged climate. For example, a male professor spoke about how tension had been building in his classroom over the course of the semester, which he believes "resulted in a student leaving the class in tears." He believed that the "student's discomfort with the course subject matter snowballed and escalated so that there was a real sense of tension that had to be released." The professor took responsibility for the "emotionally charged atmosphere" of the classroom and his own paralyzing apprehensions and subsequently blamed himself for not being able to create a safe environment for students to learn. Some professors acknowledged how their own feelings of anxiety led them to avoid dialogues on race, which further heightened an already emotionally charged situation.

Domain 2: Reactions to Difficult Dialogues

Many professors described reactions from the perspective of (a) what actually happens during difficult dialogues and (b) what they believe might happen in a dialogue about race. In all of the interviews, the participants described both their perception of student reactions and their own personal reactions to difficult dialogues about race.

Professors' Perceptions of Student Reactions: Emotions

Anxiety (typical). The most common emotional reaction to a difficult dialogue was anxiety. It is interesting that fear and apprehension about the topic of race were described as existing even before an event triggered a racial dialogue. A female professor stated, "So students have all those feelings, I think, lots of anxiety and fear." One male professor noted that "One can see in some individuals [students] the anxiety of not, of not necessarily wanting to engage in that conversation or have attention directed to them." Other professors echoed similar sentiments and believed that students were fearful of saying or revealing offensive or biased thoughts or beliefs.

Anger (typical). Anger and hostility were also observed as emotional reactions of students. One professor described a dialogue in which she saw students become "really intense and hostile" toward one another. Such dialogues, observed one female professor, can be transformed into a personal attack: "What had gone from being a discussion about issues had transformed into a

personal attack." Another professor spoke about an incident in which she witnessed students react with "anger and rage" when discussing cultural identity. She also believed that the facilitator of the discussion was at a loss of how to productively facilitate student reactions of anger.

Defensive (typical). Another emotion observed was defensiveness. One female professor commented, "I have observed over the years the defensiveness of people feeling, Aren't I doing enough?" The professor attributed defensiveness to feeling blamed and accused of being racist. White students, she observed, often seem compelled to explain their actions and/or claim that others simply misunderstood their intentions. Defensiveness is not the sole attribute of White students. One professor perceived Black students responding similarly. For example, African American students often use their own experiences to directly contradict curriculum portrayal of the Black experience.

Sadness (variant). In describing the emotional range that she witnessed in her classroom, one female professor expressed her surprise when students would reveal their sadness and believed that these particular students were taking a risk at exposing their sadness in a classroom dialogue: "It's very emotional, which I hadn't expected. . . . I appreciate that some students will take risks and be willing to feel sad and own those emotions instead of just relaxing out of them." She believes that students who openly acknowledge sadness are taking a risk and courageous because they are exposing their vulnerability.

Professors' Perceptions of Student Reactions: Behaviors

Crying (typical). White students crying in response to a difficult dialogue was a common observation. One professor described an incident in which students were discussing how certain curricula are inherently racist. This led several White students to leave the room crying. A male professor stated, "I had lost complete control of the class, and the student, the White woman, began to cry at her desk." Another professor spoke more generally: "The way race comes up in my classes is difficult. . . . There's a lot of emotion around it, there's tears . . . and I often feel a bit clueless and not well-equipped to handle it."

Student leaves classroom (variant). Leaving the classroom or physically removing oneself from a racial dialogue was described by several professors. With regard to when a discussion on race became increasingly hostile, one

female professor stated, "And so it just spiraled downward. . . . There were some very hostile, volatile discussions. Students, White students left the room." Similarly, a male professor described a situation in which he felt as if he had lost control of the class: "As I continued to sort of try to manage this broader conversation, she abruptly got up and left the class. And I kept going in the class."

Withdrawn (typical). Professors described withdrawal behaviors as "lack of verbal participation, blank looks, silence, and non-challenging/ passive dialogue." In trying to assess what was happening with students, a male professor stated, "I try to get some sense by looking at the students and figure out how they're responding, and you see some students nodding in agreement, and some just blank." One female professor speculated, "And so I imagine more of the withdrawn students were afraid to share that, or maybe just afraid to say they don't know how they feel . . . hoping that they're going to survive the hour and come back next week." Overall, professors appeared to impute different meaning from their observations of withdrawn student behavior, ranging from the students being disinterested to the students being fearful of actively engaging in the dialogue.

Professors' Emotions

Anxiety (typical). The most common feeling that professors experienced was anxiety—fear of losing control in the classroom, fear of being perceived as incompetent, and fear of being seen as biased by others. Whereas most expressed a desire to more adequately deal with their own anxieties in facilitating racial dialogues, one male participant indicated that dealing with powerful feelings was not his responsibility as an instructor: "When it carries the sort of emotional impact that race issues can, I suppose it provokes a certain amount of anxiety because that's not my realm and I'm not a therapist or a counselor in those situations. I'm an instructor."

Disappointment (variant). Several of the participants spoke about feeling disappointed in themselves over their unsuccessful attempts to facilitate a difficult racial dialogue. A male professor felt to blame for not being able to create a safe space for his students: "I want the classes I teach to feel like a safe space for students to express their views and I feel that I was unsuccessful and I'm sorry for that." Another spoke about feeling disappointed about the outcome of the difficult dialogue: "I feel so disappointed in myself."

Uncertainty (variant). Professors described being overwhelmed with uncertainty in recognizing and understanding what was happening in a

racial dialogue, questioning their facilitation skills, and tentatively approaching the dialogue. One male professor stated, "I was still not understanding, I really didn't understand what had happened. . . . I've been teaching for 20 years and maybe that it's just I simply haven't recognized it when it happened." Other professors believed that the uncertainty they felt was related to their inability to anticipate what issues, dynamics, and feelings were likely to arise.

Domain 3: Training Experiences

The ability to successfully facilitate a difficult dialogue on race fell into three categories: (a) lack of education or training, (b) informal training and experiences, and (c) continuing education.

Lack of education or training (typical). Lack of training in preparation for facilitating racial dialogues was identified as problematic for some professors. They spoke about lacking skills, strategies, expertise, and competence needed to successfully manage a classroom discussion on race. One professor stated, "I don't think I have good strategies for doing that, and I think in the courses that I teach there's a lot of descriptions of the nature and extent of racial inequality in educational opportunity . . . but I don't think I have good strategies for thinking about framing or managing it." Others spoke about their academic field and their readiness to facilitate a dialogue on race: "I think it's a very conservative field, and it's very behind other conversations around race and areas like cultural studies."

Informal training and experiences (variant). Several professors shared how exposure to diverse populations, speaking to colleagues, and multicultural readings enhanced their ability to recognize and facilitate racial dialogues. A male professor spoke about his experience moving to what he considered a diverse city and how "being exposed to a much more racially and ethnically diverse population" influenced how he approaches issues of race in the classroom. Other professors spoke about processing their experiences with colleagues and how these "process sessions" helped them to better understand the dynamics of a racial dialogue.

Continuing education (variant). Several participants spoke about the types of workshops, seminars, and formal educational experiences that have helped to prepare them to facilitate dialogues on race. One female professor stated, "Right after I'd taken the training where I was exposed to some of the concepts of internalized racial oppression, internalized White superiority, White

privilege . . . I was really wanting to engage in issues about race and the shape of the classroom kind of took this racial tone immediately." Other professors spoke about the influence of attending a formal training program on multicultural and diversity issues on increasing their comfort level for managing classroom discussions on race. One female professor questioned her ability to identify difficult dialogues even after training but indicated that she became more motivated to seek further education.

Domain 4: Influence of Professor's Race on Difficult Dialogues

Many of the participants discussed the role that race played in facilitating difficult dialogues. Not only did the participants discuss their Whiteness in relation to difficult dialogues but they also shared their perceptions of faculty of color's experiences with difficult dialogues.

White Faculty Experiences

Lack of experience with racism (typical). Lack of personal experience with racial discrimination was seen as an obstacle by students of color to the credibility of White professors. A male professor stated, "And of course, I also worry about the extent that my inability to identify the personal experiences of racial discrimination because I've not experienced the kinds of racial discrimination that many students [minorities] talk quite a bit about." Another male professor indicated that students of color may doubt his ability to appreciate or understand a difficult dialogue: "I think there is speculation that the person who has felt the disdain, in a sense, may have doubts that the professor in front of the room appreciates what has gone on. And I can understand why that would be the case."

Lack of knowledge of race and culture (variant). Several White professors honestly admitted to a deficiency of knowledge on topics of race and culture. As opposed to a lack of personal experience with racism, this category is representative of a belief that the professor lacks understanding and knowledge of the experiential reality of people of color. On the topic of racial identity, one professor stated, "As a White faculty member, how do I actually support not just White students who need to understand issues of race, racism in the U.S.? How do I help students of color? Can I help students of color deal with not just White students getting up to speed on it but with their racial identity issues and as part of a group or not? And I feel entirely inept at doing that."

Lack of shared identity with students of color (variant). The absence of shared identities with students of color was seen as problematic. There was a strong belief that faculty of color had shared identities with students of color, making it easier to relate. One professor describes the distance felt with students of color, especially around issues of inequality: "Primarily the students of color were raising this . . . and I was keenly aware that I was a White professor trying to deal with this set of issues, and [long pause] and these students were sort of making strong identity claims to identify themselves with populations that they felt were not getting an equal opportunity."

Perception of Faculty of Color's Experiences

Faculty of color have more credibility on topics of race (variant). This category reflects a belief that faculty of color are more equipped to teach race-related issues and thus are perceived as being more competent and better received by students. A female participant believed that were she a "minority," she would have greater credibility on racial issues: "But I think it definitely mattered because I think if I were an African American or Latino faculty, I probably could have spoken more—perhaps if I felt safe—more directly to some of my own experiences in the academy. And I think that that would have brought a certain level of authority to the discussion." Another stated, "Well, I certainly think it does impact the dialogue in that I think that if it were a Black person presenting the message, that it would be more credible, you know, to African American students than White."

Domain 5: Strategies for Facilitating Difficult Dialogues

All of the participants discussed what they believed were both effective and ineffective strategies for facilitating difficult dialogues. Two categories were considered ineffective and seven effective.

Ineffective Strategies

Ignoring the difficult dialogue (variant). This category reflects participants' belief that ignoring race in the classroom is invalidating and dismissive. One female professor observed a guest speaker continually changing the subject instead of directly addressing students' race-related questions: "Race comes up, you know, the faculty person is uncomfortable, they change the subject, they get support from some students in the classroom to change the subject, and then we're all sitting there. It's a big elephant in

the middle of the room. The ignoring it is a feeling for many students of color and some White students of complete invalidation."

Passively allow students to manage the dialogue (variant). Participants felt it was ineffective to take a passive stance and allow students to deal with the difficult dialogue. One female professor talked about the tendency to expect students of color to "teach" the class about racial issues: "Oftentimes what happens is, folks of color are educating White folks . . . raising their consciousness about race . . . but as a facilitator you have to know that it's not that expectation and that can be difficult for students of color." A passive stance was often associated with not knowing how to intervene.

Effective Strategies

Acknowledge emotions (typical). Many of the professors spoke about the importance of acknowledging emotions—both students' and their own—during a difficult dialogue. For example, "I think acknowledging that, probably verbally saying, 'This is emotional, let's sit with that for a minute,' . . . I suppose you could say, 'Let's go home, this is not very productive,' and maybe that would be a good thing. Probably I wouldn't do that. Probably I would say, 'Let's step back and talk a little bit about why this is emotional." Another example is, "I try to take my students' feelings seriously, and when a student says something with emotion in class, I generally want to be cognizant of that and to respond to it in some way—I always want to take what my students say in class seriously, but particularly so if there seems to be some emotional weight attached to it."

Continue the difficult dialogue after the actual event (typical). Many of the professors observed that difficult dialogues rarely resolve in a single session. An effective strategy was to keep the conversation open and to follow up. After one particularly heated session, one male professor sent an e-mail to his class summarizing the incident and encouraging that students continue the conversation: "While the experience is still fresh, I wanted to say a few things about Monday night's class. . . . The challenge for us as a class is to find ways to express our feelings about race and racial inequality in ways that do not preclude authentic engagement with one another. I hope that we can keep this in mind in the remaining weeks in the term." A female professor emphasized the importance of revisiting difficult dialogues: "Even if I drop it, or somehow we move off topic, I find that we will then come back to it, and it's important that we did go on and come back and circle around those issues, and continue the discussion."

Create a safe space (variant). Several professors felt that creating a safe environment was an important strategy. One female participant shared, "I find ways to help them feel safe, create a safe space that's an authentic safe space, not one they think they have to agree to because they're part of the group. But then also I think to break into smaller groups, for example, and start to explore things in smaller groups because that's safer than the large group, you know, come back and have reports and do things in a larger group."

Set precedent about addressing racial issues in class (variant). Some participants purposely prepared students for dialogues on race. A male professor spoke about how he set the expectation, early in the semester, that race issues would be discussed in the course and might evoke strong feelings: **"**I said early in the semester, 'Look, we're going to talk about these kinds of issues now and throughout the course, and if people are concerned, you know, they should express themselves.'" Another did so in the following manner: "Now what I do is the disclaimer at the beginning of the experience, saying, 'Are you all willing to take a risk so that we can have that experience together?' So it's almost preparing a group ahead of time for that, you know, that might be coming. . . . I figure if they're being authentic and they throw something out, we're better prepared as a group to tackle it."

Instructor admits own personal challenges (variant). Some professors indicated that honestly acknowledging personal challenges and their own struggles in a difficult dialogue was important. For example, a woman shares her own struggle and process: "What I did know was that it would be important to acknowledge the power and privilege that I brought to the space and to my role, and that I was going through this process of sort of reflecting on that and what it means." Another female participant spoke about telling her class that she was still learning and growing: "I always say to the class at the beginning that that's my learning edge class. I mean, that's the class where I feel the most challenged because I wasn't trained [in that]." One female participant discussed the importance of being aware of her own issues and not allowing them to color a difficult dialogue: "So it's really to kind of be more generous and have more patience and tolerance, and not let my own stuff get projected onto them."

Increase awareness of racial microaggressions (variant). A few of the participants discussed the role of microaggressions in difficult dialogues and the need to identify and address these incidents. A male participant

stated that he is continually challenged in recognizing offensive racial acts that are unintentional and unconscious by nature: "So it's something that I think that is an ongoing learning process for me to try to sort of identify when such examples are occurring, and I also recognize it's also a challenging thing because the very nature of racial microaggression is such that the perpetrators are often unaware of what they're doing." Another participant felt it was important to be able to name microaggressions when they are happening in the classroom: "So maybe one of the skills would be how to figure out—not, you know, first to name it. I guess they have to be named and deconstructed in order for anyone to know that they're doing it."

Domain 6: Failure to Recognize Difficult Dialogues

Not all of the participants were immediately aware when difficult dialogues were taking place. Although they had experiences of negotiating classroom conversations on race, they could not recall and had trouble describing specific incidents of difficult dialogues. They doubted their ability to be aware of these dialogues but often described a sense of "unease" in the classroom. Two categories emerged.

No experience with difficult dialogues (variant). One quote from a female professor exemplifies this category: "You know, I don't have a, I don't have actually a memory of difficult dialogues in the classroom about race. I think that when, I mean I think the issue is important and one that I do discuss, so we talk about health disparities, racial disparities of health, and spent quite a bit of time on race . . . but I don't really see a difficult conversation in the classroom." A male participant had difficulty recalling if he ever experienced a difficult classroom dialogue on race: "I haven't noticed it in the last several, several years. I mean, I can remember back, and I don't remember. So if you feel like it's getting out of control, and it's not always around issues of race. There are a lot of other discussions that come up that may provoke differences in a certain kind of view, or there's people going absolutely off topic. And that, I think—I can't think of a lot of times where it's gotten to that point."

Not competent to recognize racial microaggressions (variant). In response to a workshop on racial microaggressions, one female professor stated, "I think that a lot of us are more impressed by our inability to recognize these things more than we're impressed with how bad it would be if they happened, I mean, you know?" This instructor was more disturbed about her

inability to recognize when a difficult dialogue is occurring than having to facilitate one. A male professor acknowledged that racial microaggressions are likely to have occurred in his classroom but that he cannot necessarily describe an exact incident: "Yeah, I can't remember a concrete instance of that but I'd be surprised if there hadn't been some." A female participant expresses her respect for colleagues who are able to identify and address microaggressions in the classroom: "Well, you know, I guess I've been impressed by how they've handled [microaggressions], by how they've been able to recognize them . . . and this professor was very in touch with that. It wasn't, it wasn't intentional. It was still problematic, though. And so . . . she kind of made it clear that that wasn't probably the right thing to say, but she didn't, you know, totally embarrass this person."

Discussion

Our study produced a multitude of rich information concerning how White faculty perceive, react to, and deal with difficult dialogues on race in the classroom. Valuable findings emerged with regard to (a) characteristics of difficult dialogues, (b) emotional reactions and their possible effect, and (c) potential facilitation strategies.

First, loss of control and the emotionally charged nature of the classroom climate were often associated with what made racial dialogues difficult. All our participants acknowledged a strong desire to facilitate difficult dialogues well but were hindered by several factors: (a) uncertainty and confusion about what had instigated the dialogue; (b) inability to recognize when a difficult dialogue was occurring; (c) student emotions of anxiety, anger, and defensiveness; (d) professor emotions of anxiety and fear; (e) interactions among students that assailed instructors' sense of classroom control (crying, leaving the room, and personally attacking one another); and (f) lack of knowledge or skills to properly intervene.

In essence, all of these attributes seem related to one another. Uncertainty about what constitutes difficult dialogues, what triggers them, and the reasons for intense student emotions, for example, contributes to confusion, mystification, and anxiety. It goes without saying that productive intervention cannot occur when a situation or problem is not recognized or properly diagnosed. This in turn leads to a deep sense of personal failure, disappointment in self, and feelings of inadequacy as an instructor. It is interesting that two of our eight participants claim to have never experienced difficult dialogues (even though they acknowledged their existence), had great difficulty identifying

them, and stated that they were not competent or capable in recognizing racial microaggressions that often trigger difficult dialogues.

Second, anxiety was identified as the most common and impactful emotion because it seems to be an overarching forerunner of dialogues on race (Sue & Constantine, 2007; Watt, 2007). Whereas anger and defensiveness, for example, were often mentioned, anxiety seems to even predate these feelings. As noted by a participant, "anxiety is present on racial topics even before a racial incident occurs in class." For White educators to effectively facilitate difficult dialogues they must be comfortable discussing race and racism on an emotional level.

These overall findings are disturbing because they indicate that even experienced White educators (full professors) are anxious about and ill prepared to productively and successfully facilitate difficult dialogues on race in classrooms. Furthermore, studies suggest that both students of color and White students consistently attribute failed or successful racial dialogues to the racial and cultural awareness, knowledge, and skills of classroom professors (Sue et al., 2009; Sue et al., in press).

Finally, when difficult dialogues occur in the classroom, they may have different results depending on the actions of the instructor. Difficult dialogues can have negative consequences, such that the classroom can erupt into an intense verbal exchange ranging from friendly debate to angry confrontation or personal attacks; it can cause serious polarization and halt the educational process (Young, 2004). Difficult dialogues on race, however, can also create exciting opportunities for learning if handled effectively (Kiselica, 1999). Our study suggests several strategies that may be employed by White faculty, and perhaps all educators regardless of race, to facilitate successful racial dialogues.

1. Acknowledge emotions and feelings. This was a strategy that directly emerged from the study. Strong emotions related to dialogues on race are often ignored or left untouched in the classroom when they occur. For example, one female professor stated that after an especially intense outburst, she tried to remain oblivious to it: "I just kept going on in class as if nothing happened." It is essential that educators take the lead in acknowledging and making sense of intense feelings that originate in a racial dialogue. There is considerable support for this facilitation strategy in both our study and the general research literature (Jackson, 1999; Watt, 2007; Young, 2004). Emotive responses like guilt, anger, defensiveness, and being turned off, helpless, or afraid are roadblocks to having a successful difficult dialogue. Scholars indicate the importance of deconstructing emotions with

their implicit statements, meanings, or effect (Sue, 2003; Young & Davis-Russell, 2002): guilt ("I could be doing more."), anger ("I don't like to feel I'm wrong."), defensiveness ("Why blame me? I do enough already."), or helplessness ("The problem is too big, so what can I do?"). These "nested" feelings, unless released, may represent major roadblocks to racial dialogues; they make it difficult for participants to listen and understand one another (Sue, 2005; Young, 2004).

2. Acknowledge and self-disclose personal challenges and fears. Again, this strategy derives directly from our study. According to Kiselica (2004), "when we disclose our doubts, mistakes, and imperfections, we give our students . . . the message that it is safe for them to examine their own short-comings in our presence" (p. 847). He further states that it is important for instructors to self-disclose and expose their own vulnerabilities and biases to students in order for healthy racial dialogues to occur. It has been found that honestly acknowledging one's fears and limitations does several things: (a) It frees one from the constant guardedness that results from denying one's own racism, sexism, and other biases; (b) it allows instructors to use their own honesty, truthfulness, and openness as a model for students in conversations about race; (c) it allows one to set an example of taking risks and to display courage through acknowledging and sharing their own limits and biases in dealing with personal racism; and (d) it encourages students to communicate openly about their feelings and their "flaws" because they see that their professor is equally flawed (Hughes, 2005; Kiselica, 1998, 1999; Sue, 2003).

3. Actively engage the dialogue. As our study suggests, ignoring difficult dialogues and passively allowing students to take over the class were identified as ineffective strategies. Two common situations described by our participants illustrate this point. When students leave the classroom after a heated exchange or when students cry in class, many professors described being "clueless" about what to do. These two examples elucidate multiple consequences for professors who allow these events to occur without actively intervening. First, White students and students of color perceive the professor as having lost control of the classroom, reinforcing the fears of the instructor (Sue et al., 2009; Sue et al., in press). Second, the professor and remaining students are left in an unenviable position: They are unable to ascertain the reasons behind the student's actions. Third, it left the student's issues unaddressed without closure for everyone.

Professors must not allow difficult dialogues to be brewed in silence. Withdrawal will almost certainly occur in many students when approaching a difficult dialogue and it is important to take control in these moments. Even when the professor is unclear about the racial dynamics, two of our categories under effective strategies (set precedent for addressing racial issues and continue dialogue after the event) imply the following to be helpful: (a) suggest leaving the conversation until the next meeting after everyone (including the instructor) has had time to process the event; (b) intervene by using microtraining techniques that encourage students to listen, observe, and reflect with one another; or (c) enlist the help of class members to make observations (Hughes, 2005).

4. Create a safe space for racial dialogues. Several professors mentioned the importance of creating a safe space for students to risk being open and honest in their communications with one another. The reference to this condition appears to mean lowering the anxiety level of students by creating a climate of trust and encouraging risk-taking among participants. Professors are central to creating a safe environment for racial dialogues (Kiselica, 1999; Young, 2004). They not only model their own comfort, courage, and openness, but they also must be skilled in using facilitating strategies guided by the principles outlined above. Scholars have identified other facilitation strategies likely to enhance risk-taking and that are consistent with our findings. They include the following: (a) Prepare for a difficult dialogue by helping students understand the difference between descriptive, interpretive, and evaluative levels of observations and feedback that minimize defensiveness (Bolgatz, 2005); (b) express appreciation, support, and validation to students for having the courage to speak up (Hughes, 2005); (c) plan and instigate a difficult dialogue to proactively control the process and prepare students for the topic (Young, 2004); and (d) emphasize that no one is immune from making mistakes or racial blunders (Sue, 2003).

Limitations

Although our study provides rich information on difficult dialogues, caution must be exercised in generalizing our findings. First, our sample size comprises only eight White faculty members from a major Northeastern private university. Furthermore, the sample was not gender balanced and more women than men participated. Second, data gathered in interviews are selective and limited to the questions asked and the behaviors observed.

For example, it is important to note that our study does not claim to have sampled the entire universe of feelings likely to arise nor the detailed parameters that define difficult dialogues (Johnson & Longerbeam, 2007; Watt, 2007). Third, professor observations of student responses represent secondhand reports, and future studies should focus directly on their experiences. Last, it is important to note that the vast amount of data generated in qualitative studies does not allow us to explore other and perhaps equally important findings. It was noted, for example, that (a) it was White students and seldom students of color who left the classroom or cried during a difficult dialogue about race; (b) although guilt was observed to occur frequently among students, our participants seldom mentioned it for themselves; (c) formal and informal means (consulting with colleagues of color) of continuing education were seen as being helpful; and (d) White faculty perceived that faculty of color would have an easier time in facilitating racial exchanges (a belief often contested by some faculty of color). All of these findings are worthy of further discussion and research.

Nevertheless, our study indicates that classroom teachers are central to successful dialogues on race. Our volunteers, however, seemed ill prepared to deal with issues of race and racism in the classroom. These results are disturbing, to say the least, when one realizes that our participants were all full professors with decades of teaching experience, occupied positions in determining curricula and teaching policy, and were in a place to influence junior colleagues. Thus, it is imperative that education and training programs systematically prepare educators and psychologists at all levels of education in the science, practice, and art of facilitating difficult dialogues on race (Sanchez-Hucles & Jones, 2005).

Appendix
Interview Protocol

We are interested in studying how racial issues, whether explicit or implicit, make their presence felt in the classroom. As you know, when these incidents occur, strong emotions are often felt or expressed by the parties involved. These difficult dialogues or exchanges often occur between students and/or the professor and have the ability to impede effective classroom communication and learning. Hence, we will be focusing on your experiences with difficult dialogues as an instructor.

Appendix (continued)

1. What constitutes a difficult dialogue on race in the classroom?
   - What makes the dialogue difficult?
   - Is there much fear and anxiety for students and teachers around difficult dialogues? *If yes,* why do you think this is?
   - Describe a difficult dialogue that has recently occurred in your classroom.
   - How did you handle this difficult dialogue?
   - How did you feel during this situation?
   - What kinds of thoughts did you have during this situation?
   - What was the outcome?
2. How might your race have affected the outcome?
   - If you were a person of color, what might have been different?
   - How might the racial composition of the classroom affect the outcome?
   - Did you notice anything about students' body language, verbal language, or behavior during this dialogue?
   - What messages about race might have been communicated by students during the difficult dialogue? By you?
   - Looking back on the situation now, is there anything you wish you had done differently?
3. Describe some effective strategies you feel you have used to facilitate difficult dialogues.
   - How can instructors create a climate for inquiry while minimizing negative reactions?
   - What are some strategies for acknowledging and facilitating emotional inquiry?
   - What are some strategies for acknowledging and facilitating cognitive inquiry?
   - What is the ideal result of these dialogues on race?
4. How do you think difficult dialogues may be related to racial microaggressions?
   - In what way do you think racial microaggressions played a role in the difficult dialogue(s) you described earlier?
   - Can you give examples?

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