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Recommended Citation

Medina, Patsy and Mix-Brown, Karen (2008). "Addressing Racially Charged Discourse in Adult Education Graduate Courses," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2008/papers/46>

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Addressing Racially Charged Discourse in Adult Education Graduate Courses

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Key Words: critical race theory, counterstorytelling, classroom discourse

Abstract: Data from dialogue journals, audio-taped conversations, and written life narratives of an assistant professor and graduate student reveal that racism has permeated their lives and they continue to confront it in academe.

Purpose

This research study began by accident. Patsy Medina, a newly hired assistant professor of Puerto Rican descent who was teaching an online graduate course on Workforce Development received an e-mail from one of her students, Karen Brown, an African American woman studying for her degree in the Adult Education Masters Program at Buffalo State College, that included the following statement: "It's the first time in college I've had a professor of color." This initial e-mail sparked verbal and written dialogues between us. Eventually we realized that our written and verbal conversations were data and a formal research study ensued with the purpose of exploring the experiences of a professor and a student of color as navigate the corridors of academe in their respective roles.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework utilized was Critical Race Theory (Ladson-Billings, 2004; Solorozano & Yasso, 1998; Valdes, McCristal Culp & Harris, 2002). CRT fit appropriately with the narrative analysis style of this research study. According to Ladson-Billings (2004) four tenets encompass CRT. One of them proposes that in order to deal with racial hegemony storytelling is used to challenge the dominant construction of race via the voice of experience of people of color and is a legitimate means of scholarship to critique the accepted social order. Delgado (2000) maintains that storytelling is part of the cultural capital of many people of color and in the CRT literature is referred to as counterstorytelling. Those who are marginalized can counter the accepted knowledge of the dominant culture by "creating a new narrative that is visible to all and, perhaps, alters perceptions in their community and in the larger culture" (Williams, 2004, p. 168).

Methodology

Data were collected for a period of nine months and consisted of e-mail messages which evolved into dialogue journals, audio taped conversations and written biographical essays. The form of qualitative research utilized during this study was biographical narrative analysis (Ellis & Bochner, 2003; Merriam, 2002). This type of approach allowed for our stories to be "analyzed in terms of the importance and influence of gender and race, family of origin, life events and turning point experiences" (Merriam, 2002, p. 287). Furthermore, this methodology permitted us to utilize our "life experiences to generalize to a larger group or culture" (Ellis & Bochner, 2003, p. 737). We began data analysis before we had established that CRT was our theoretical framework and while we were still collecting data which is a common approach in qualitative research (Merriam, 1998). We first developed categories that delineated the topics we had discussed which led to us to understand to the extent that our data were revealing that race and

ethnicity were overriding factors in our dialogues. Using race and ethnicity as an overarching category, we then developed broad categories (Merriam, 1998), and as we further analyzed the data those categories were narrowed and revealed the different venues in academe where we encountered racism.

Our Counterstories

That CRT was the appropriate theoretical framework was clearly confirmed when we began to write our autobiographies. We wrote about our first recollection of experiencing racism. Karen's story was particularly painful and demonstrated the callousness of bigotry.

The first time that I have memories of discrimination was when I was about 8 or 9 years old. It is odd, because I remember it so vividly. I was in Brownies and the troop that I was in was made up of all little Black girls from my little dirt road community. I am not sure how it transpired, but our troop had a joint meeting with an all White troop at their church to make crafts for some kind of Christmas bazaar they were having. We were all so excited and had been admonished to be on our very best behavior, which naturally we were. When we arrived we learned that we were going to paint ceramic Santa and Mrs. Clauses. We painted with all the energy and passion of Picasso. Our leaders helped us paint and made sure our samples were perfect. I remember thinking that they were simply beautiful and wonderfully showcased our likeness. My troop painted our figures' hair black, their skin brown, and their eyes brown. If we made a mistake our leader would repaint them, touch them up. We were so thrilled with our work! We were in one part of the room, and the White girls were on the other side, so we never really saw what they were doing and they never really saw what we were doing. When we completed all of ours, we laid them out to dry on a table with all the White girls' creations. Well, ours were black, and theirs were all white. The White leader looked at ours and started laughing and said to the other White troop leaders, "These will never do; nobody would buy anything that looks like a darkie." She and the other leaders laughed, and laughed, then picked all of our figurines, and threw them in the trash. Our leader said nothing to them, but told us to get our coats, and get ready to go home. We cried all the way home and asked what we had done wrong? Her only response was, "It is nothing for you to worry about it. That is just how some people are."

Patsy's recollection about her initial encounter with prejudice was not as compelling as Karen's, but she now realizes that it was the first time that "otherness" (Alfred, 2001; Cloke & Little, 1997) had been imposed upon her and that it was her first overt encounter with institutionalized racism.

I was about 7 years old and my brother was very sick—had a high fever and was vomiting. We walked the few blocks to Flower Fifth Avenue Hospital. Although the hospital was located in the midst of Spanish Harlem, there were never any Spanish speaking personnel at the intake desks. My brother and I had become accustomed to translating for my mother who only spoke and read Spanish at that time. My brother, who was older than me by 11 months, generally translated the written forms, but he was ill, so on this day that task was left for me. We quickly filled out the first few lines of the form where I showed my mother where she should write her and my brother's names, our address, age of patient and other such information until I encountered a checklist that I did not understand. Next to each little checklist box were the following four categories: Black, White, Puerto Rican and other. I asked my mother, in Spanish, "Mommy, what should I put here? She told me that although we were white, we should check the box

next to Puerto Rican. I asked why and she told me, “Because we are Puerto Rican.” I continued to ask her questions, but she told me that we needed to fill out the form and once that was done, she tended to my big brother, disregarding my confusion. Until that day, although I knew I was Puerto Rican, I had also believed I was a little white girl.

The written narratives related our experiences with racism chronologically and could fill a book. For example, Karen recalled that in high school she was known as the “Black cheerleader” and remembers a teacher saying that there “would be an uproar” if there wasn’t at least one African American girl on the squad. She said, “I never knew if I made the squad on my ability or if I was just a plain token.” Patsy revealed that when her family moved from the projects in Spanish Harlem to another in the Bronx where the inhabitants were mostly white, they were met by a white woman at the elevator who wanted to spray their furniture with the roach spray she was holding.

These counterstories were significant because they demonstrated the menacing remnants of racism and informed how we dealt with the racist discourse that we have encountered in traditional and virtual Adult Education graduate courses.

Racially Charged Discourse in Adult Education Graduate Courses

The data revealed that racially charged discourse took place in graduate classes when instruction was taking place and during informal banter.

“Academic” Discourse

Many of our narratives consisted of how we were coping with racially biased statements in the classroom. Karen, the student researcher, created the metaphor “Cape of Black America” that she put on to “fight the good fight” when other students made racially charged comments in class. However, our data revealed that sometimes we had the “cape” on, other times we took it off and put it aside, and, most often, we sought to share it.

Patsy, the assistant professor, discussed how during her first semester she was teaching a hybrid course on Workforce Development and issues associated with providing training to welfare recipients were being addressed. She was quite surprised when one student implied that most welfare recipients continued to have children out of wedlock just so their monthly monetary entitlements would be increased. She was doubly shocked when other students followed suit and one student even used the term “breed like rats.” Her initial reaction regarding the comments on the childbearing motivations of welfare recipients was to react to them very personally, asking herself, “Are they saying these comments because they know I’m Puerto Rican and the stereotype exists that most of us are on welfare?” After the initial dismay regarding these comments, during her first semester of teaching, she addressed each comment that she felt was biased, regardless of the topic, in quite a forceful manner. She was wrapped in the “cape.” that semester.

Karen shared an incident that occurred when discussing a book written by Cornel West in one of her all-online classes. A white female student discussed the stereotypes regarding the sexual prowess of African American men and used a derogatory term to describe the male sexual organ and made disparaging remarks (which she thought were complements) of the sexual proclivities of African American men. Karen verbally assailed the woman for making such comments and was also quite frank with the professor for not reprimanding the student. Yet, she had become weary of addressing bigoted comments.

As for this on-line racism issue, I think people are bolder online because they are hiding behind the shield of a computer. I do not know but, just maybe, that is a new kind of covert racism... Lately, fighting racism online has depleted a lot of my energy. I am

beginning to wonder if race relations will ever improve. Sometimes it seems like we are making progress and then I am blindsided by a remark so insensitive, so stereotypical, dare I say, so rash that I am boiling with anger. Because of this, my anger has become multi-dimensional.

Karen also wore her “cape” in the traditional classroom. She described an encounter when she was working on a group project to develop a publicity campaign to make the public aware of literacy problems among adults. There was a white male in the group who brought some articles that he thought should be in the appendix of their report. She was incensed when she saw what he had in hand. One article described via statistical analysis that African Americans had the lowest literacy skills in the country. Another focused on the issue of high blood pressure among African Americans and Puerto Ricans. She felt that they just confirmed stereotypes and asked the student how those articles would help promote awareness about literacy. He argued it was important that the public be made aware of this type of information about “minorities.” After arguing back and forth, Karen said, “It’s just not going to be in this paper, not with me in the group!” She took his articles out of the binder and threw them in the trash.

What is most intriguing about our data is that they reveal that Patsy and Karen were at different junctures in terms of addressing bigoted statements in the classroom. As was explained above, Patsy had her “cape” securely in place when she first began to teach at Buffalo State. However, at the end of the semester, she was accused, most vigorously by white and students of color alike of veering “off topic” too often. One of her African American female students accused her of being an “interloper.” Patsy realized that she must “worry about bad evaluations, so I can’t call out the students on each of the biased statements that they make...I have yet to find the right balance.”

Hence, the “capess” were not totally off, but neither were they wrapped as tightly. What was apparent was that both Patsy and Karen wanted to share them with other students of color and to their dismay, not many of them wanted to be enveloped in them. Karen had expectations from her peers of color, but also from all of the students with which she attended classes:

Most of it is because I am tired of fighting this fight alone; I wonder where my people of color are when I am going out on a limb fighting the good fight. Second I wonder, have we been conditioned to accept being talked to in such a disrespectful manner, or if I am just being overly sensitive. If it is conditioning and acceptance of whatever is dished out, my anger now has another layer...Other degrees of my anger are found in white students, or any other non-color student for that matter, not objecting to racist remarks, people of color should not always be the only one objecting. If a white person recognizes that a remark is racist they should call the person on it. This rarely happens online and even less so on campus.

Karen concluded, “Frankly, I am tired of putting on my “cape” and being the Stop the Racism Superhero in class.” She has asked other students of color at Buffalo State why they do not react more forcefully, and was told, “Because I know that you will.”

Banter—Informal Conversations

Quite surprising, our data revealed that during informal interactions with students, when instruction was not taking place and racially charged comments were made, our “capess” were generally off and we rarely confronted the persons who made those types comments. In an Issues and Perspectives in Adult Education which Patsy taught and where Karen was a student, we noted several racially and ethnically offensive comments that were directed at us. One such case occurred when Karen had turned around to speak to a female student, and a white male student

sitting next to that student, jokingly said to Karen, while mimicking Gary Coleman's cadence from the show *Different Strokes*, "Whatchu talking about Willis?" Karen did not respond but thought, "Why would he say something so inappropriate to me?"

Another episode that became quite notorious in our department occurred right before a class session had begun. A white female student, who was in her mid-fifties and had been raised in New York City, asked Patsy to approach her desk. Patsy did and was asked, "Do you spit when you fight?" Patsy's face must have indicated bewilderment, because the student stated that when she was in high school, Puerto Rican girls routinely chased her and spit on her. Patsy recounted her feelings as follows:

I was so taken aback that my first reaction was to think about if I actually spit when I fight and I thought of arguments that I had with my husband. But, of course, that's not what the student was asking. She was alluding to me being in a street fight. Here I was, the professor in the class who could wield some power, and she tried to snatch that status away and reduce me to that of an irresponsible teenager. How dare she?

Neither of us tended to challenge the individuals who made such comments when the encounter was informal in nature. Given that each of us could be so combative during "class time," it was quite perplexing to us that our "capes" tended to be off during encounters that we deemed informal. Why were we so silenced by them? Yet, we also acknowledged that in both of the episodes described above, the students were trying to be friendly and connect with us. Karen asked, "Are we being too sensitive? Are our racial lenses on too tight?" Moreover, given how we have been silenced throughout our lives, we certainly did not want to silence others. Nonetheless, occasionally, those "capes" flew on. An end-of-semester party was being planned and one of the white male students said, "Yeah, and Patsy's gonna boggie on down." Karen and another student of color, who was sitting next to her, glared at him and said in unison, "Yeah, she's going to boggie on down and spit!"

Discussion

Our counterstories, especially the written narratives where our most painful memories emerged, demonstrate the menacing remnants of racism. We had been marginalized for much of our lives, yet in terms of our present economic status in society, we were quite mainstream. Karen said, "We are two women of color who live in neighborhoods surrounded by white people, and here we are, still obsessed with race." That is a significant point. Our experiences were not those of the mainstream and counter the race-neutral perspective that posits that there is no distinct privilege to being white (Merriweather Hunn, Guy & Manglitz, 2003; Williams, 2004; Westfield, 2004). Furthermore, the data revealed that our experiences tended to be quite different than the those of majority in our institution of higher education. We must ensure that the lessons we have learned from injustice serve us well as we press forward through the structures of academe.

Yet, our expectations must be pragmatic. First, we must realize that white people have been granted a status of privilege that many do not acknowledge because their racial identity is so deeply ingrained, and is therefore, an invisible construct that never has to be articulated (Thandeka, 2000; Westfield, 2004). When "whiteness is the default setting of the culture, then race only matters when it involves those who are not white" (Williams, 2004, p. 185). Members from the dominant culture have no need to be obsessed about race as are we. Second, we have to recognize that given the invisibility of their race, many of the graduate students with whom we interact do not have a shared racial identity, and, therefore, do not realize that when they make racially biased statements, it is an attack on everyone who has the shared racial and marginalized

identity of the group they are maligning. For example, Patsy's students probably did not comprehend that when they articulated the stereotypes of welfare recipients, they were also disparaging her (Harlow, 2003). Third, we must understand that in this country it is difficult to discuss race. Hence, the past social and educational experiences of many of the students have not provided a framework or a discourse to get beyond stereotypes, defensiveness, and, most importantly, discomfort (Williams, 2004).

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