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Humanism, Racial Perceptions and Identity Development in an Adult Classroom Setting: An Empirical Study

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Abstract: *This qualitative study provides outcome data that documents shifts in self identity and in cross racial perceptions when historical and modern day white humanist Euro-American models are introduced to students in two pre-graduate level classes. Classroom facilitation about the models and their work provided positive archetypes to counter capitalist images that have traditionally been touted as this nation's "heroes."*

A major challenge for educators is to create the conditions by which our students evolve to higher levels of understanding self and understanding of others. Teaching courses such as Multicultural Counseling exposed me to the challenge for many of my Euro-American students in overcoming white guilt while my students of color attempted to overcome their own prejudices, anger and, sometimes, even hatred toward white people. Ultimately, I learned that two major factors, cultural encapsulation and slanted teaching of this nation's history and its figures, contributed to not only stiling my students' evolvment but also perpetuated cross racial alienation.

A qualitative study involving two levels of research and data collection was conducted to measure one attempt to address the perceptual deficit. Level one involved biographical research, done by the author, and included historical and modern day white Euro-Americans, all of whom were humanists. The historical Euro-American humanists included John Brown, an abolitionist executed for his efforts to end the institution of slavery (Reynolds, 2005), Colonel Robert Shaw, the first white Colonel of black troops in the Civil War (Emilio, 1891; Duncan, 1992), Colonel Shaw's mother, Sarah Shaw, an ardent abolitionist (Duncan, 1992; Gilchrist, 1995), William Lloyd Garrison, abolitionist and editor for the longest running abolitionist newspaper in the United States (Bordewich, 2005), Helen Hunt Jackson, advocate and writer for Native Americans in the late 1800's (Jackson, 2003; Jackson, 1988; Odell, 1939), and Henry David Thoreau, writer and abolitionist (Canby, 1937). These individuals served as allies for people of color during historical periods in which doing so meant risking social status and, in some cases, loss of life.

Two modern day Euro American activists, Courtenay Tessler and Lynn Filiatreux, were included in the data collection. This portion of the study included two individual taped sessions, separate taping sessions in a graduate counselor education classroom where each presented as a guest speaker, followed by a one joint session in which Courtenay and Lynn discussed challenges of activism on behalf of people of color.

Common themes emanating from the lives of these Euro-American humanists, both historical and modern, included: 1) Early exposure to racist behavior and attitudes, 2) Development of meaningful relationships with people of color, 3) Active involvement in deconstructing racism, 4) Paying a price for being an ally from interpersonal confrontations to loss of life and, 5) Possession of a spiritually based identity.

The study's second level introduced capitalist and the aforementioned humanist Euro-American models to a total of 69 students in two classes of Introduction to Counseling, a course required for students entering Master of Science programs in Counselor Education, School Psychology and Vocational Rehabilitation. Students were provided answer sheets in which their names were not requested but they were asked to provide their cultural/racial background. The identity marker was then used to create two categorical data groups of "white" (35) and "other" (34).

Students were instructed to write down the name of the person as images of six capitalists and the six aforementioned historical humanists were alternately presented. The capitalist images included historical figures that were actively engaged in and benefited from the exploitation of Native Americans and/or Africans brought to this country in bondage. This "capitalistic" cohort consisted of Andrew Jackson, Colonel George Armstrong Custer, Christopher Columbus, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin. The students were then told the name of each individual and asked to briefly write what they knew of the individual. Afterward, a detailed description of each individual was provided. Recognizing the void in knowledge, the information provided for the humanists was more detailed and included the common themes uncovered in the first level of research. The students tallied their results on correct identification of images without descriptors and how many images they correctly described once they were provided the name in the image.

Results

Of the 69 participant responses only one correct identification of a humanist, Henry David Thoreau, was made. Most students did not attempt a guess. In contrast, with a correlated top score of 6 for recognizing all six "capitalists" the student group identified as "other" scored slightly higher in their recognition of the models at 3.20 as compared to 2.47 for white students.

After the image was identified and students were asked to write a sentence about the individual, students still failed to ascribe the achievements of white humanists. The vast majority did recount what made the "capitalist" model recognizable and famous. Again, there was variation between the two student groups in their ability to correctly describe the historical images. Students in the "other" group, scored 5.47 out of a total of 12 (total images) and 5.165 for those self identified as "white."

These differences in response by the two racial groups provide opportunity to examine the psychological impact when presented with capitalist and humanist models. Confidentiality was given to the students as their names were not requested, subsequently there was a high degree of honesty provided in the responses and led to three major findings. 1) The study results indicate that capitalist models were most recognized over their humanist contemporaries, who were virtually unknown. 2) Concluding comments and the outscoring of white students by their counterparts demonstrates avoidance by white students in identifying with white capitalist images. Loewen (1995) states that "African American, Native American, and Latino students view history with special dislike... with nonwhite students ... (performing) most worst in history" (p. 12). This study refutes Loewen's findings in that white students entering the counseling profession demonstrated a greater disassociation than their classmates of color for

capitalist models. 3) Loewen further states that “Students don’t even know they are alienated... (from the subject matter)” (p. 12). Student responses to follow up questions in the study reveal that the disparity in knowledge for both white and non-white students contributes to alienation from themselves and from one another.

Response to Questions

1. For those individuals who you identified correctly: Do they have anything in common? If so, what?”

Students self identified as “white” consistently used the following terms to describe the individuals they correctly identified; “white,” “powerful,” “men/male.” Further elaboration included comments such as, “killed people of color,” “slave owners” “responsible for starting wars,” “belief that other races were not equal to them,” “a great deal spent learning about them in school.”

Several responses challenged the notion that these individuals should merit their position in history, “All powerful white males in American history. People that we are told are heroes,” and, the following statement which reveals further context, “White, male, powerful and admired by historians. The presidents and war generals/conquerors were easier to identify than pacifists and abolitionists.”

The students self identified as “other” had similar descriptors but with the noted difference in deeper intensity of describing the behaviors of the individuals noted as “capitalists.” Several student statements reveal this, “They were advocates in their own time but they were hypocrites because they were slave owners or part of the population who had some rights” and, “For the ones I guessed all colonized and ruined communities, and ended communities of indigenous populations.”

These individuals affixed oppressive treatment of people of color to historical figures who were described by many in this categorical group as “glorified.” Three students of color expressed their extreme polarized sentiments toward the white capitalist Euro-Americans in statements such as, “I have nothing in common with these individuals.” even though the question did not ask what they (the student) had or didn’t have in common with the individual. The psychological distancing reveals a worldview that is in opposite polarity to the capitalist models; models identified as white.

2. “If there were individual who you could not identify, did they have anything in common. If so, what?”

White students described the common traits of the humanists by ascribing such terms as “advocates for people treated inferiorly. They stood against the status quo” or “people who were going against the norm.” Students identified as “other” had strong emotional responses to learning about white humanists and is where we begin to see the potential for cross racial empathy and bridging: “They were mostly humanist, for positive change. It appears to me that my lack of knowledge of these individuals is part of “the problem.” “I have heard oodles about forefathers and Custer, but the rest, if I recognized them it was because of my own readings, not

school.”

This group provided many positive sentiments about white humanists, “...they fought for the rights of blacks. I never knew that, and I liked that there were white people back in the day that actually cared about black people.”

One student described white humanists as “progressive white folks” which reveals the student’s belief that humanist behavior was not common in our historical past.

Across both classes, students identified as “other” had similar reactions of disappointment in not knowing about humanist Euro-Americans, “The ones I did not recognize were abolitionists. I was a bit disappointed I did not know more about them and their contributions to equality.” And, “...they were all advocates for the abolishment of discrimination and slavery. Why didn’t I know this?”

Students of Color consider why they were not taught about humanist Euro Americans and also reveal surprise over the new level of understanding that they have once they are introduced to the values and efforts of humanist Euro-Americans. To some degree there was even a movement toward humanizing whites due to their being exposed to this new knowledge, “William Lloyd Garrison was someone who I was unable to identify. He co-founded the American Anti-Slavery Society, which leads me to believe we have something in common since he was fighting for the equal rights of African Americans.”

Clearly communicated in this statement is a person of color’s non racialized view of a white person as s/he came to know a white person who lived and acted on humanist values. This expression of identification bridges the racial gap as the student sees the white historical model not for his skin color but rather for his values, beliefs and actions that were committed to equal treatment of all people.

3. *“Was there a discrepancy in your knowledge of the historical models that you were familiar with versus those presented? If there was, how do you account for the discrepancy?”*

White students readily pointed to a sanitization of the actions and attitudes of historical models. One student indicated, “I was not taught about U.S. president being slave owners or promoting killings of Indians. We were not told the negative actions of our presidents. They were only glorified. Their shortcomings were not taught.”

Others came to recognize the complicity in the slanted stories taught about “historical models” and pointed to “Biased Teaching” or “teacher’s weren’t courageous enough, or didn’t care enough to go beyond that and teach us the whole story” and “positive media image of the individuals rather than the full truth.”

In reference to the actions of the white historical humanists one student stated, “their accomplishments are much less valued than those historical figures who had more “power” or who served a white agenda.” The recurring theme by white students is the perception of how these models that they have been indoctrinated with represent a set of values that, while self serving, promotes a positive value to power. Additionally, the omission of humanists who worked against the grain of capitalistic intentions feeds a general tone that their efforts and principles are not desirable. This was aptly summed up by one student’s comment, “The history of information provided in general education inadequately informs one of the best of us, subversives @ the time. The focus is instead on white males in power assuming that the contributions of these individuals (even when negative) are worthy of teaching.

While students of color from both classes also pointed to a sanitization of history, their responses also provided a personalized context, “Euro-Americans don’t want to admit any wrong doing in the birth of this nation.”

One student honestly revealed her initial reaction as to what the image symbolize, “I automatically had a negative view of these Euro-Americans of history. My thoughts were that they all had something to do with the mistreatment of blacks and that they all supported slavery and the oppression of people of color.” The disproportionate attention given to the deeds of capitalist Euro-Americans has painted their behavior as the standard and norm for all Euro-Americans. In reality, half of the people shown in the images had dedicated and, in some cases, even lost their lives endeavoring to change circumstances for people of color.

Another student of color elaborates on this preconception, “I prefer black history so to be honest, I do not read about white people and their contributions to history because in my experience it was generally oppressive.”

The cost of being exposed to a slanted delivery of this nation’s history furthers our cultural encapsulation. Undoing this fostered prejudice begins to be evident in further reflections on learning about white humanists.

4. What thoughts/feelings do you have, if any, after hearing about humanist Euro-Americans?

Loewen (1995) discusses the “crippling” affect that heroification has on students and states, “Our children end up without realistic role models to inspire them” (p. 35). With the provision of humanist Euro-American archetypes to counter the image of white’s as being solely capitalistically driven, Euro-Americans are provided models who THEY can embrace and choose to emulate. Overwhelmingly, students stated that they wanted to know more about humanist Euro-Americans. One student identified as white, stated, “I want to be one.”

While disassociation was evident in the responses of some students of color to the capitalist Euro-Americans, one student reflected a sense of adherence to the humanists, “I want to be like them.”

Another student of color stated, “I feel like I can relate to the humanist Euro-Americans because I feel that I can be or will be considered a humanist when I get to work with students and just in everyday life, I strive to be.”

Now, with knowledge about white humanist Euro-Americans, students responded with statements that revealed a higher level of empathy and understanding of white people. With a bridge of commonality formed, students of color responded with higher identification, “I love it. I’ve always told my colleagues of color that we must understand “whiteness” and how injustice also affects their socialization. The Research creates a healing process to begin a much needed dialogue of understanding and moving towards a world we imagine.”

Another student of color expressed powerful sentiments about the new knowledge,

There have always been Euro-Americans who were humanist, even during a time when majority of Euro-Americans in the United States did not believe that there was worth for all people. I feel overjoyed to learn of more Euro-Americans who did the right thing and fought for all human rights when some of their fellow friends or even family members went against them.

Students' Reflections at Semester End

The words and works of the historical and modern day Euro-American humanists along with noted agents of change such as Rosa Parks, Dolores Huerta, Cesar Chavez and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. were revisited throughout the semester. Final student journals and papers referenced the impact of having learned about white humanist Euro-Americans and, in some cases, revealed movement toward resolving white guilt and a greater commitment to social justice activism.

I felt resistant towards it (research project) when she (Dr. Borunda) spoke about it... she had said she was looking at how euro-american's either become capitalists or humanists... I now see that this model affects all ethnicities, and once the examples of capitalists and humanists were given, I understood Dr. Borunda's intentions. I see now that it is a choice, one that I hope to be conscious in making. I am grateful to have been a part of this study and for the opportunity to learn about humanist euro-american role models. This really meant a lot to me. This study also made me realize that I do have work to do in reframing my ethnicity as an actual ethnicity, just as complex as others, instead of something that I just take for granted.

White people not originally from the United States must still navigate this nation's racialized landscape. Doing so entails understanding that the individual has the freedom to make a "choice" in being humanist. This point is discussed by a white immigrant,

As an upper middle class woman with white privilege I was concerned about how this would be perceived by others. Having emigrated from a country because of the oppression by the white minority over the black majority, I felt complicit in the oppression by virtue of the fact that I was a white individual living in the country. The accompanying guilt I felt has contributed enormously to my passion for doing good deeds for others and for talking up against oppression. Now I feel I have the privilege and the obligation to freely participate in social justice causes to bring about social and political change for minorities who feel powerless and oppressed. I take this responsibility seriously and share the common goals and values with other students who strive to better the lives of others. I hope to use my white privilege and education in a positive way to benefit others whose success might otherwise be limited.

The impact of examining humanist models is summed up in this student's final paper, Dr. Borunda's lecture on Euro-American humanists is also based on appreciating strengths. I was amazed at hearing the courage and insight of Euro-American humanists. (A) good friend, a humanist in her own right... is caring and insightful,...(though) reluctant to discuss diversity in the past because of the guilt she thought she was supposed to feel. Perhaps many Euro-Americans feel unable to navigate the negativity of "white-guilt" and as a result avoid the issue. I repeated what I had learned about Euro-American humanists to her. After my explanation of the lecture, my friend said, "I needed to hear that," like it was a salve. Examining Euro-American humanists emphasizes the very strengths that our society will need to become more egalitarian. I would like to see these emphasized in schools as children respond well to positive biographies. I am hopeful that Dr. Borunda's study will provide the evidence needed to make such a change.

Conclusion

The potential for powerful and positive shifts in the way that white people perceive themselves through abandonment of white guilt which leads to embracing an active commitment to social justice. In a nation where racial division is still evident in many forms and levels, the existential dissonance can heal. The possibilities for transforming relationships across the racial divide can occur as people of color begin to perceive white people beyond the negative association accorded to those who have committed historical acts of oppression.

The complicity in NOT talking about the oppression committed by some white historical models and the omission of humanist white Euro-Americans exacerbates the division between white and people of color, thwarts white identity development, and perpetuates an unfavorable image of white Americans in our society. The introduction of white humanists provides an archetype that agents of change are white AND, they are people of color. This also counters the fostered perception that white historical models have only been exploitive of others. Knowing we have humanist Euro-Americans in our history, their lives and their narratives can provide hope and positive models for the type of behaviors we desire in future generations.

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