

# NOTE

## THE PEDAGOGICAL VALUE OF TEACHING WHITE PRIVILEGE THROUGH A CASE STUDY \*

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A GOOD CASE STUDY generates discussion in part because it convincingly portrays an unresolved problem and invites its readers to imagine a solution. In classrooms, students become engaged in analyzing and considering various solutions or resolutions to the problem (McDade 1995), tethering their thinking to the specifics of the case as they explore theoretical concepts that explain them. Lawrence (1953:215) notes, "A good case keeps the class discussion grounded upon some of the stubborn facts that must be faced in real life situations." In the process of case discussions, students often reveal their understandings and misunderstandings, allowing teachers to adjust their instructional materials and strategies accordingly. [For more extensive reviews of the literature, see Ciardiello (1995); Hawthorne (1991); Hutchings (1993a); Kagan (1993); Schon (1991); Lundeberg, Levin, and Harrington (1999); and Wassermann (1993).]

Cases are particularly effective in learning situations where students harbor unexamined assumptions or implicit inferences bias their thinking. Not surprisingly, educators have turned to case studies to encourage reflection about cultural diversity (e.g., Hutchings 1993b; Kramer and Weiner 1994; Moran 1981; J. Shulman and Mesa-

Bains 1993; J. Shulman, Lotan and Whitcom 1998; Silverman and Welty 1993, 1996; Weber and Dillaway 2001). Classroom discussions about race and social inequality often uncover students' unconscious beliefs and strongly held assumptions, which commonly surface in the course of rapid interchanges with other students. Aside from teacher intervention, few opportunities exist for slowing the discussion down and allowing students to reflect on their unexamined assumptions.

Case studies have the advantage of allowing students to distance themselves in the face of emotionally-charged subject matter: the case is about someone else. Good cases often force students to speculate about the significance of certain features in the situation before they respond. Even if students do react precipitously (for example, by jumping to conclusions), other students can slow them down by referring to the features of the case that might merit consideration before drawing a conclusion or deciding on a course of action. Moreover, students do not have to self-disclose personal views during the case discussion; they can frame their comments and opinions about the situation as "if/then" scenarios related to the protagonist in the case. In addition, cases allow students to test interpretations and hypotheses, a process that has certain pedagogical advantages in multicultural classrooms. Cases are particularly useful in discussions about racism and privilege early on in a course when students have not yet developed trust and confidence in their group interactions.

### ***Critical Moments: A Creative Approach to Diversity through Case Stories***

Advantages such as those described above motivated the development of a case study

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diversity project called Critical Moments. Critical moments are those “critical events in the educational experiences of nontraditional or historically underrepresented students, including mentally and physically challenged students, women students, students of color, gay/lesbian students, older students, and/or first-generation or working class students” (Gillespie and Woods 2000:1-2). The moments represent times of cultural struggle, situations in which underrepresented students feel unable to respond effectively to the conditions they find themselves in. (See Gillespie and Woods 2000, for a full account of this project. For analyses of discussions of two different Critical Moments case studies, see Gillespie, Seaberry and Valades 1997; Valades, Gillespie, Seaberry and Okhamafe 1997. For other Critical Moments case stories and their accompanying commentaries, see Hansen and Gillespie 1998; Henning and Gillespie 1996; Valades 1996.)

In this project, critical moments are explored in an in-depth taped interview, which is then transcribed. Using the transcription as a touchstone, a campus-wide multicultural team works with case writers who craft stories designed to promote critical thinking about these problematic experiences. In small groups, incoming underrepresented students explore ways to respond to the situations that were problematic for other students. As this happens, their tacit assumptions about diversity surface, and facilitators guide the discussion so the students examine those assumptions and invent multiple strategies for dealing with problems related to cultural difference and historically-based social inequalities.

### *“A Very Slender Thread”*

Educators such as Frankenberg (1993, 1997), Giroux (1997a, b), hooks (1990), and Kincheloe, et al. (1998) have increasingly focused attention on the importance of white privilege for multiculturalism and its pedagogy. Emphasis on whiteness in these works and on campuses implementing Critical Moments led me to compose “A Very

Slender Thread,” the first Critical Moments case to address a white student’s struggle with the meaning of her white privilege (the case appears in the Appendix; I will refer to it throughout this article). Like other Critical Moments cases, I composed it from a student interview. This particular interview was part of a larger research project on white women teaching white students about white privilege, race cognizance, and social action (Gillespie, Ashbaugh, and DeFiore 2002). The student, interviewed after she graduated, had taken two courses that covered white privilege, a concept often traced back to Peggy McIntosh’s (1988) “White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences through Work in Women’s Studies.” The student’s identity was made anonymous in the case and certain circumstances were fictionalized.

Having taught the case in two courses and in workshop contexts, I have found that it readily lends itself to application of white racial identity theories. Applying different theories allows students to practice taking multiple perspectives on the situation described in the case; in addition, students can see how different theoretical lenses reveal different features in the situation. But teaching the case also took me into new territory in my pedagogy. The class discussion uncovered students’ implicit assumptions about anti-racism—assumptions that challenged me to develop new curricular materials and perspectives.

### *The Theoretical Context for “A Very Slender Thread”*

“A Very Slender Thread” invites students to analyze whiteness as both a racial and cultural category, apply theories of white identity development (Helms 1990; Tatum 1992), and consider criticisms of white privilege (Levine-Rasky 2000). The case lends itself to discussions of Helms’s (1990) and Frankenberg’s (1993) theories of white racial identity development. Both theories present multiple ways whites relate to their own racial group and those of others (see

Tatum 1992, for an application of Helms). By placing whites on a continuum, these theories steer students away from making monolithic generalizations about racial groups and/or dichotomizing race.

Briefly, Helms's (1990) research shows that whites develop through several stages (what she calls ego statuses). Each stage possesses a coherence that structures how one views race in American culture. From within the stage, identity hinges on a set of assumptions that makes perfect sense to the individual. In the first stage, *naiveté*, a white person views him or herself as curious about people from different ethnic/racial backgrounds without recognizing historically-based practices of oppression that continue today. In the second stage, *dissonance*, the white person recognizes differential treatment based on race alone or hears quite negative evaluations of people of color. He or she must weigh these events against more abstract ideals available in the culture, such as "love thy neighbor as thyself" or "with liberty and justice for all." A third stage, *reintegration*, describes how whites manage dissonance by merging with their privilege, accepting racist assumptions by assuming people of color are given a fair shake in today's society. Not all whites reintegrate after dissonance, however. Some move to stage four, *introspection*, where they resist any participation in racist thinking or action. Helms argues that serious anti-racist work begins when white people connect with other white anti-racists, and in the final stage, *autonomy*, the white person turns his or her efforts to social actions that dismantle social and economic oppression.

As a supplement to Helms's model, which focuses on psychological attachment to one's racial/ethnic group as a basis for identity, I teach Frankenberg's (1993), who presents a model based on the language practices she observed in the narratives of white women she studied. She argues, "Three discursive repertoires—essentialist racism, color and power evasion, and race cognizance—together constitute a universe of discourse on race difference and racism"

(188). In *essentialist racism*, race is both a meaningful and deterministic category for how people can be treated and judged worthy. In *color and power evasion*, race is shunted into an abstract moral category and judged in principle as not relevant to people's worth. The "shoulds" of this moral abstraction are strongly asserted: "Race should not matter." "People should judge people by their character and not the color of their skin." But these absolutes merely paint over racist practices and the day-to-day reality of racial discrimination and allow a person to appear moral while in reality evading the consequences of power differentials. Finally, in *race cognizance*, white women actively work as anti-racists to dismantle both personal and structural forms of racism and their complicity with it.

In their discussion of "A Very Slender Thread," students readily identified both Helms's and Frankenberg's theories in the case study. They noted that Maggie's family of origin is in the third stage of Helms's model, reintegration; in Frankenberg's terms, they are essentialist racists, as they assume race determines character and worth. Maggie herself has been in the power evasion position; "she just stuck to the belief that skin color wasn't important." Students readily identify how the power evasion position is attractive to Maggie as both a moral respite from and challenge to her family's essentialism. In the case, however, Maggie seems to be moving into the *introspection* stage. She attributes her new awakening to the meanings of race and inequality to her reading about whiteness and to her teacher, who serves as a *race cognizant* role model. Yet some students quickly see how Maggie's intellectual understanding of racism fails her in the exchange with Dora, who raises serious concerns about institutional or structural racism. In their discussions, my students also discussed gender issues in the case, including how gender socialization might have affected the uncle's assertive behavior and the mother's evasion of conflict. They also saw Maggie's connection with Dr. Ligon as emotionally impor-

tant for Maggie, given Maggie's tension with her family and her need to identify with anti-racist whites. But cases teach more than theories; they spark interactions among students. During the exchanges about Maggie's case, their implicit assumptions about race and privilege emerge, assumptions that need to be aired and examined through careful deliberation.

### ***Implicit Assumptions about Whiteness and Privilege Revealed in the Case Discussions***

In the process of their application and analysis of the theories of racial identity development, students revealed some of their implicit assumptions about being white and anti-racist. My students are juniors and seniors in an upper division program at a university in the Pacific Northwest; in the classes in which the case was taught, 80 percent to 85 percent of the students were white women. First, the students assumed that they could use the moral language of the colorblind position without being colorblind themselves. Thus, they argued that Maggie needed more support from her classmates and her teacher. Appealing to Maggie's argument that "race should not matter," students were eager to stand against the essentialist racism of the uncle (whom they did not find stereotypical); in fact, they themselves gained morally viable positions in the discussion by asserting that race should not matter. They could not see how their loyalty to Maggie came at Dora's expense; several saw Dora as "flaming" about race; that is, being overly dramatic or exaggerating the situation of her racial group.

During the first part of these discussions, the pedagogical challenge is to give students time to untangle the contradictions in their arguments. They do not see their own position as one of color blindness tossing around abstract statements in morally righteous discourse while they focus on the moral culpability of the uncle. As the theories points out, the fight against racism is easy when the racist is clearly identifiable, transparent, and explicit. But responses to

racism become more complex when it is systemic and exposes people of color to exploitative, life-threatening, economically unjust conditions, as happens to Dora's family.

As students come to see their own claims as supporting the colorblind position, they turn to different aspects of the case and another implicit assumption emerges; namely, their belief that anti-racists are lonely. Again and again, white middle-class students have focused on Maggie's isolation and her lack of a support system. When I have asked what anti-racist social networks might be available to Maggie, students are stumped, especially when asked about white women's anti-racist groups. In fact, several white students in interracial relationships have bemoaned the lack of support they feel from their families and referred to their group of friends as being cobbled together. Early in the case discussion, some students persisted in their assertion that the problem is simply the protagonist's lack of personal strength. Several said, for example, "Maggie should just stand up to her uncle." But once the discussion shifted and they focused on her potential loneliness, no one argued that personal assertiveness was an effective solution. They could see that for Maggie to assert herself with her family was less a matter of will power than of finding new social structures for interaction and support.

This last implicit assumption that my students uncovered in their discussion of "A Very Slender Thread"—that there are few whites doing anti-racist work—led me to think about how to make whites in race-cognizant social networks more visible to them. This effort led us as a class to examine different social organizations that encourage racial and social justice—a consideration that Helms (1990:55) would call part of a process of *immersion*, or finding images and people that allow one to "establis[h] a realistically positive view of what it means to be White." We turned to historical sources such as Crawford, Rouse, and Woods's (1990) work on women in the

Civil Rights movement and to local organizations that promote cross-cultural understanding through dialogue and honest exchange. Some students were surprised to learn that organizations, such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, are integrated. The case moved the students and me into new territory because their assumptions had surfaced in meaningful ways during the course of the discussion about the case.

Case discussions can take this evocative turn, but teachers need to be cautious, too, as the case method carries dangers (see L. Schulman 1992). Since context in the case is limited, a case can evoke heated reactions that have more to do with students' attitudes than the case situation. Students can self-disclose too much, shifting the focus of discussion from the case protagonist to individual students. Students' contributions can become unrelated, or their analysis can distort the theories the case has been designed to teach. Stereotypes can be unintentionally reinforced (for example, that all white women are emotional, like Maggie, when talking about racism). Or students might remain too closely tied to the given context. Such dangers may be amplified when race and privilege are prominent in the case. For example, students may see Maggie's anti-racist struggle as merely a personal problem with her mother and uncle. More extremely, students may resist the entire multicultural curriculum (Young and Tran 2001) and shun participation.

Finally, if teachers have not thought through the complex dimensions of race, they can reinforce unconscious racist assumptions. In "A Very Slender Thread," such a conclusion might be: "We're better than Maggie and her family; now we can go on and feel good about ourselves as we are." Indeed, in her research of white students who studied multiculturalism in teacher education courses, Schick (2000:97) found that many "warrant their positions as knowledgeable, sympathetic insiders by distancing themselves from those white people who will not be disciplined [about their

racism]." White privilege must always be seen in the context of a broader racist culture; whiteness itself is not the enemy, even though it has historically been associated with forms of domination (Howard 1999).

When done well, however, a case discussion reveals tacit assumptions and hidden inferences that neither student nor teacher might otherwise discover. Such openings create opportunities for teachers to design new strategies for particular groups of students grappling with issues of race and privilege. And if the interchange about the case is open, the case can serve as a springboard for teachers and students to demonstrate innovative responses to misunderstandings and unexamined suppositions. Such mutual and reciprocal exchange promotes the ideal toward which multicultural educational practices aspire—democratic and growth-enhancing classrooms.

#### APPENDIX CASE STUDY: "A VERY SLENDER THREAD"

Staring at her dinner plate, Maggie tried to avoid eye contact with her uncle, who was sitting across the table from her. He was in rare form that night after finding the textbook from her sociology course. "*Displacing Whiteness*, eh?" he laughed. "And just who does this author think will displace us, huh?" he asked Maggie with a smile on his face, egging her to respond. Maggie felt her insides tighten, right below her solar plexus. Maggie's grandparents had been openly racist, and her mother and uncles had simply absorbed their views. Her mother tried to avoid conflict at all costs and so never said much directly about race; she was more indirect, reinforcing how important it was to date and marry what she called "like-minded people." But her uncle had learned his lessons well, and he liked to flaunt his bigoted views. Maggie usually left the room or ignored him when he got in one of these moods. It was hard when he became bigoted, though—she loved him. When she was growing up, he took her to Mariners baseball games and taught her how to drive a tractor. The two of them would put sugar on big slices of his homegrown tomatoes.

Maggie looked at the last diced tomato from her salad still sitting on her plate. Before she could say anything, her mother replied to him, "Please don't disrupt our dinner with bickering. I made this meatloaf just like you like it, Larry.

Why don't you tell us about the new stray cat you took in? I thought you said you had saved enough animals."

While Larry talked about rescuing his newest stray cat, Maggie thought about her sociology teacher, Professor Gail Ligon. Just last week, Dr. Ligon told the class about her own experience of standing up to her racist grandfather, who then kicked her out of the house. "Now looking back," Dr. Ligon had said, "I would do it differently; I wouldn't have lost my temper. I think that I would have tried to talk to him about the different experiences I was having. 'It's not like that for me, Grandpa,' I could have said. I might have still been kicked out, but I wouldn't have that shame, the memory of losing it." Maggie couldn't imagine Dr. Ligon having a temper. As a professor, she had such a way of making everyone feel comfortable—or at least it seemed that way to her—until this last part of the course on whiteness.

In fact, Dr. Ligon was the first white woman that Maggie had heard talk openly about racism and white privilege. Also new to Maggie was Dr. Ligon's observation that white women were somehow complicit with racism. Maggie realized that before this class, she just assumed that fighting racism was men's work. It seemed to her that men might be in a better position to take social risks. Maggie felt she took risks in thinking differently from her family, but most of her thinking was private, inside her head. When racism or race relationships became a topic of conversation, she just stuck to the belief that skin color wasn't important. "I try to treat everyone the same," she told her friends and family.

It was really hard for her to read the book by Frankenberg. She could identify with some parts of the book, having personally experienced some of the issues Frankenberg raised. But she was unsettled by some of the hard-hitting language that Frankenberg used. Maggie persevered, though, because she really liked Dr. Ligon, who had praised Maggie's journal writing and really paid attention to her ideas in ways that no other instructor ever had. Dr. Ligon's questions in class made her think, made her feel that she had something important to contribute to the class. She could see that Dr. Ligon worked hard to be what Frankenberg called "race conscious," and Maggie felt that she might be able to emulate her.

So that evening at the dinner table, Maggie decided to do something she had never done before. She wanted to say something significant to her uncle, something that would engage him so that he might see his bigoted ways. "I mean," she thought to herself, "his racism is so transparent. He's never gone to college and works with guys who think just like he does—or at least don't

express themselves around him if they do think differently. No one I know has ever tried to have a discussion with him about this."

Finished telling the story of how he rescued the stray cat, Uncle Larry turned again to Maggie. "So are you forced to take this class?" he asked her bluntly.

"Oh, Uncle Larry," Maggie said slowly, her voice shaking slightly, "I'm really enjoying this class. It's making me think about my values—about human dignity and human rights. We're all more alike than different in the long run."

"Yeah, right." Larry responded sarcastically. "Are you going to have a bunch of poor ignorant colored people take over everything in this country, just *dis-place* the people who have worked hard to get where they are?"

"Oh come on," Maggie's mother intervened. "Please don't argue at my dinner table. Maggie, can't you just keep what you're learning to yourself? You're both spoiling my dinner. Larry, I've made a new dessert. Maggie, why don't you help me bring it in?"

Maggie's insides were tied in knots. She recognized from her reading assignments that she was in the middle of a double whammy—a complicit mother, a belligerent uncle. She thought to herself, "I am 20 years old and have gone along with unspoken rules all my life—just make everyone happy by remaining quiet. I can't disappoint anyone, especially mom. But I can't keep fading into the woodwork; I have to do something different."

"Mom," Maggie said, "I don't want to stop this discussion."

Looking at her uncle, Maggie said quietly, "I really disagree with you, Uncle Larry. People of color are not all ignorant, just like white people are not all smart. It's hurtful to make gross generalizations like that."

"You're getting too good for your family, huh?" responded Larry, getting red in the face. "Want to take up with the colored now, huh?"

"No," Maggie said her voice steady now. "I want to ask questions about what's fair and right in treating people humanely."

Maggie had never spoken up for herself before, and her uncle was glaring at her. She thought, "I'll bet this is the first time anyone has challenged him this way."

Putting his napkin on the table, Uncle Larry said, "I don't have to take this white bashing or hear how you've been brainwashed. I've done a lot for this family since your father died. I'm only trying to protect you from the harsh realities out in the real world." He slowly got up from the table and headed to the front room.

Getting up to follow Larry, Maggie's mom said frantically, "Now Larry, come on and have some

dessert. Maggie won't say any more, right Maggie?"

"Mom," Maggie said without thinking first, "I can't keep quiet in front of such racist views anymore. I just can't; it's not right. It's not even Christian." She realized that she said "Christian" very loudly.

Hearing that word, Larry said, clearly agitated, "You don't know what you're talking about. This discussion is finished. Thanks for the dinner, Sis. I'll be going now."

As he left, Maggie's mother turned to her and said, "Family's all I have, now that your father's gone. And I need Larry to help me out, and your Uncle Sonny too. You can't talk to your uncle like that; please understand. You can have these conversations when you're on your own, in your own house, but not here. I can't afford this to happen."

"But Mom," Maggie implored, "can't you see me too, my views?"

Her mother turned and walked out of the room. Maggie knew her mother was going to call Larry's message machine and leave an apology. Maggie sat alone at the table, dazed but different inside.

The next day at school Maggie tried to find Dr. Ligon before class to tell her about her experience, but Dr. Ligon was deep in conversation with a student about an assignment. Then Maggie looked for her new friend Lucy, another white student with whom she had talked about the textbooks. But Lucy was not around. So when Maggie got to Dr. Ligon's class, she felt full of her confrontation with her uncle and wanted to tell the class what she had done. She felt fear because her mother was still upset, but she also felt tinges of courage for speaking against racism the first time ever. Lucy finally came in and sat next to her. Dr. Ligon began class by asking the students for reactions to the readings, and Dora, a Latina student, said that she thought that *Displacing Whiteness* was long overdue. Dr. Ligon seemed pleased that Dora responded. Dora had participated very actively in small groups but less so in the larger class. She was one of three students of color in this class of 40 or so. "Go on," Dr. Ligon encouraged her. "Tell us more about what you mean."

"I mean," Dora said with quiet conviction, "what the author argues is true, and it makes me very upset because I'm tired of being patient. Why is it taking whites so long to see their unjust ways? It's like a luxury, you know, for them to sit around and discuss their whiteness and privilege while my uncles and aunts are dying in the fields and not getting educated."

Suddenly, Maggie raised her hand and before

she could think, she blurted out, voice shaking again like it had with her uncle, "But this book is so important to help us whites think about these things because it is so hard when you've been raised around racism and get punished, ignored, or made fun of when you try to refute it. I know, I almost got excommunicated from my own family last night."

"Well," Dora said, taking a deep breath, "Maybe your family is upset with you for a moment, but don't think that you can equate that with the trauma of migrant field workers who are sprayed everyday with chemicals and can't find adequate shelter. You sound like you're asking for a pat on the back."

"I can't believe she thinks that," Maggie thought. She felt her face turn red. "Don't cry, don't cry," Maggie told herself, "And just stay where you are—don't leave. But I really am afraid I will lose my mother's love. And what will mom do if Uncle Larry stays mad?" Maggie tried to catch her friend Lucy's attention for support, but Lucy just averted her eyes and looked out the window. No other student spoke up. She felt as if she were hanging on to a very slender thread. "What now?" she asked herself.

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