



PART IV
Personal Perspective

Deconstructing Whiteness: Uncovering Prospective Teachers' Understandings of Their Culture—A Latina Professor's Perspective

Luz Carime Bersh
National-Louis University

This qualitative case study focuses on White prospective teachers' exploration of their cultural identities. Through writing, as a tool for reflection, 46 teacher education students exposed their understandings about what it means to be White. Deconstructing whiteness became a starting point to reflect on issues about race and cross-cultural experiences for my students and for me, their Latina professor.

I thought I didn't have a culture because I am not a minority, so I thought of my culture based on what I am not . . . Now I'm starting to see that there are many layers to being White. (Jenny,¹ age 21)

Rationale

Critically examining our cultural identities has become a necessary continuous exercise for all educators in the context of an increasingly diverse America. The Census 2000 School District Tabulation² indicated that 40% of school-aged children in the nation are non-White.

The IES National Center for Education Statistics (2005) projects a steady increase of non-White youth (especially non-White Latino) and a gradual decline of White young people between 2000 and 2020. By the year 2010, 1 of every 10 children will be foreign born, and by 2025, the non-White student population will raise to 50% (Franklin, 2001).

Considering these racial and cultural demographic changes, prospective teachers not only need to become prepared to meet the needs of this multicultural population of students coming into the public schools; they also need to increase their understanding of how as educators they have the potential to reproduce or interrupt oppressive cultural dynamics in the school (Banks, 2002, 2006; Garcia, 2002; Sheets, 2005).

Thus, prospective teachers need support in developing awareness of their own culture and the importance culture has in shaping identity, beliefs, and values as foundational forces in becoming culturally sensitive educators (Banks, 2006; Koppelman, 2008). Awareness of one's own cultural identity is fundamental in the process of developing critical consciousness about how each one of us fits into and relates to an increasingly multicultural society (Sheets, 2005). We gain insights into how our own cultural experiences impact cross-cultural

Correspondence should be sent to Luz Carime Bersch, Assistant Professor, Interdisciplinary Studies in Education (IDS), National College of Education, National-Louis University, 4950 W. Kennedy Blvd., Tampa, FL 33609. E-mail: luzcarime.bersh@nl.edu

¹The real names of the students have been changed to protect their confidentiality.

²The Census 2000 School District Tabulation (STP2) is prepared by the U.S. Census Bureau's Population Division and sponsored by the National Center for Education Statistics.

dynamics. These insights become foundations on which we can conscientiously reflect on issues about race and culture and recognize others' racial, ethnic, and cultural worlds.³ In particular, given the cultural-racial mosaic we find in classrooms today, prospective teachers need to develop the skills, dispositions, and cultural sensitivity to interact with multicultural students on a daily basis (Banks, 2006; Garcia, 2002).

Participants

Forty-six prospective teachers, who voluntarily participated in this study, were enrolled in a curriculum development course focusing on multicultural education, which I taught. All students identified themselves as White. The gender distribution of the participants was 36 females and 10 males. Forty-three of the students' ages ranged between 20 and 24. One female participant was 35 years old and two males were in their early 40s. All students came from predominantly White, small, rural towns in New England. A majority of them are first-generation college students. All participants are education majors in a relatively small college in "the heart" of New England. At the time the study was conducted, student population in this college was 95% White.

The role of the researcher as participant in an ethnographic study and in qualitative analysis is fundamental (Glesne, 2006; Silverman, 1993). Thus, I include myself as a participant in this study. As a Colombian woman, I had never had to think about my racial identity prior to living in the United States. In the year 2000, teaching at a major university in the South, one of my students pointed out: "You are white, but you are not *White*" [italics added]. I realized then that being White in this country goes beyond skin color. The fact that I am not a United States native inherently puts me in a non-White, minority category, in this context.

As I began my career as a college professor in a small city in New England, where the population is 98% White, I had to seek understandings of my students' predominantly White culture. I also had to seek ways through which I, as a Latina professor of education, could connect with them and engage them in critical discussions about race and cross-cultural dynamics within the framework of a multicultural education course.

Thus, I found myself turning around the lenses through which multiculturalism is explored and examining Whiteness from the perspective of a Latina professor. My

White students' understandings of their own culture have been essential in informing my views. Thus, uncovering these understandings became the main purpose of this study. I acknowledge that my ethnicity, nationality, my position as an immigrant, and a member of a minority group are contributing factors to my personal cultural biases and interpretations of the data. Thus, I emphasize this analysis is based on a Latina professor's perspective.

Whiteness, as the dominant discourse, becomes the cultural norm from which everything that is not White is defined. The power and privilege embedded in the mainstream White discourse, reifies and perpetuates its dominant quality.

During my initial interactions with the students in this study, my self-introduction was marked by emphasis on both my nationality and ethnicity. However, when my students were asked to provide an introductory self-cultural portrait, they did not allude to their racial or ethnic backgrounds. Rather, their focus revolved around their family relationships, their friends and roommates, their town of origin, their hobbies and music preferences. Why were race and ethnicity not considered important factors in their descriptions of their cultural identities? What are my students' understandings of what it means to be White? These became the guiding research questions in the study.

Literature Review on Whiteness

The literature on the topic of Whiteness provided some insights on the elusive nature of the interpretation of being White as a racial or ethnic category (Allen, 1999; Kaufmann, 2001; McIntosh, 1995, 1997). Nakayama and Krizek (1995) expose central complexities in finding meanings of whiteness: It is invisible, it is inessential, it is the *normalizing center* [italics added], from which everything else is defined. Whiteness, as the dominant discourse, becomes the cultural norm from which everything that is not White is defined. The power and privilege embedded in the mainstream White discourse reifies and perpetuates its dominant quality. Thus, White culture does not need to be aware of, or deconstruct what it means to be White (Dalton, 2002). A metaphor that Banks (2002) offers helps to understand this dynamic:

³I purposefully use the terms *race*, *culture*, and *cultural-racial* interchangeably throughout this article. Drawing a line to separate the meanings of these terms in certain contexts can be limiting or misleading, particularly when referring to Whiteness. Throughout this article, Whiteness is discussed as culture rather than as a racial category.

“Just as fish are unable to appreciate the uniqueness of their aquatic environment, so are many mainstream American students unable to fully see and appreciate the uniqueness of their cultural characteristics” (p. 1).

Gaining awareness of the dominant discourse is a critical starting point to reevaluating power dynamics and inviting alternative multicultural paradigms that will lead to a more equitable society. Thus, deconstructing whiteness plays a crucial role in reflecting on the social and cultural dynamics of power and inequality, and challenging social injustice (Applebaum, 2005).

Studies on White identity (Dalton, 2002; Howard, 1999; McIntosh, 1997) highlight the importance of deconstructing Whiteness as a mechanism to help Whites rethink what it means to be White. Banks (2002) believes that this deconstruction of White identity is followed by a reconstruction of Whiteness, a critical step in the process of reforming the curriculum in American schools.

Several studies indicate that predominant characteristics in the production of White identity are color-blindness and invisibility (Allen, 1999; Applebaum, 2005; Dalton, 2002; McIntosh, 1995, 1997). However, when Whiteness is displaced from the center of racial discourse, where it holds a normalizing, comfortable, invisible value, its meaning and inherent symbolic values are challenged as it acquires the dimension of an object of analysis, subject to deconstruction (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995). Studying Whiteness, thus, means studying racism; it brings to the forefront the visibility of Whiteness as privilege, Whiteness as a symbolic cultural value (McIntosh, 1995, 1997).

Resistance is an unavoidable consequence of engaging in such discussion, as largely documented in studies about Whiteness (Allen, 1999; Applebaum, 2005; McIntosh, 1995; Nakayama & Krizek, 1995; Sheets, 2001, 2005). Therefore, expecting resistance from my students, the critical question became, how do I get this process started? It only seemed logical to begin by supporting my students' process in expanding their awareness of their own cultural identities: What does it mean to be White?

Methodology

The documentary *The Color of Fear* (Mun Wah, 1994) has been recognized as an effective instrument for engaging individuals in discussions on race and cultural privilege (Pearson, 2000). This documentary serves as a cathartic experience for a group of eight men who discussed complex issues about race and ethnicity. The participants were two African Americans, two Asian Americans, two Latino Americans, and two White Americans. Most people who view the film are deeply moved, and feelings of discomfort and anxiety are brought forth in discussions as the documentary raises awareness

on issues of White privilege and institutionalized racism in American society (Pearson, 2000).

Having personally been greatly affected by this documentary, I chose viewing *The Color of Fear* as the starting point to elicit students' reflections on the meanings of Whiteness. It is a powerful tool in raising awareness on how racism permeates different layers of society in both overt and covert ways. In spite of the limitations this tool presents, such as the fact that it only offers a male perspective, personal experiences and responses to White racism become the focal issue of the discussion, and it is limited to the voices of those participating, it reveals powerful perspectives of the racially culturally oppressed. This is a stepping stone in the process of cross-cultural understanding. The following are students' testimonies that attest to that:

I learned a lot from this video, I never knew about all the hardships different ethnicities face. – Ally

... We still have a ways [sic.] to go when it comes to accepting people for who they are and not what they look like or where they come from. – Jamie

... Looking back on where I grew up, a lot of racism did take place, but wasn't talked about or shown. Truly it couldn't be shown because there was barely anyone of different color. – Erika

The analysis of race as an oppressive discourse is a challenging task for White students who have had limited, if any, exposure to racial and other forms of cultural diversity. However, the vicarious experience of observing color against Whiteness, as exposed in the documentary, created the dichotomous racial interaction for raising awareness on the meanings of Whiteness in juxtaposition to other races, a new experience for the majority of my students.

Writing is an excellent tool assisting critical reflection; thus, my students were required to write their thoughts and reactions to the documentary, later becoming the basis for a reflective essay. Both the initial notes and the essays provided the data for this study.

A qualitative analysis using Nakayama and Krizek's (1995) model of rhetorical strategies of Whiteness was used as a theoretical framework for categorizing and analyzing the data. Nakayama and Krizek's (1995) rhetorical strategies of Whiteness can be defined as assumptions many Whites make that hinder their involvement in issues of race.

Nakayama and Krizek's model (1995) “uncovered six strategies of the discourse of Whiteness” (p. 298). These strategies can be summarized as follows:

1. **White equals power.** In this category, Whiteness is viewed as “the majority,” a privileged social position tied to White identity.
2. **White is not color.** Here, Whiteness is defined in juxtaposition to what it is not: “White means not having any other ‘blood lines’ to make it impure . . . one can only be White by not being anything else” (p. 299).
3. **White is a scientific definition.** It is ahistoric and lacks social status. In this definition, Whiteness is tied to the biological determinism assumption that Whiteness is strictly linked to skin color.
4. **White equals American.** In this rhetorical strategy, Whiteness is perceived as a normalizing invisible agent directly linked with nationality: Americans are White.
5. **White is intangible;** therefore, it has no labels. This strategy is linked to the colorblindness attitude: I don’t see skin color; I see you as a human being.
6. **White is acknowledging a “symbolic ethnicity”** (p. 302). In this rhetorical strategy, Nakayama and Krizek (1995) found in Whiteness an identification with European ancestry. An acknowledgement of an ethnic European background, which, in many cases, lacks any real meaning or value; it is used as an “accessory . . . [which] is not a substantial part of their everyday lives” (p. 302) and, thus, is not a central factor in an individual’s cultural identity.

Data Analysis and Results

Students’ written responses were coded and classified into the rhetorical strategies outlined in Nakayama and Krizek’s (1995) model. The following are some examples that show these archetypical responses:

1. White equals power:

A White person is brought up knowing he or she will have the upper hand over ethnic groups no matter where they are in America . . . Bringing diversity in a classroom where there is little or none will open young minds in this nation to the reality that people with different color skin [sic.] or different backgrounds can be just as productive and intelligent as the common White race. – Randy

Aside from the clear acknowledgement of equating Whiteness with power, notice how Randy’s response brings forth the notion of Whiteness as the standard, “the common White race.”

I do not consider myself a racist but after watching this movie I noticed that I tend to think of myself as the more superior class. I hate to admit that, but I think it has a lot to do with how I’ve been raised and what I’ve been taught over the years. – Cathy

Cathy acknowledges here, with some embarrassment (“I hate to admit that . . . I tend to think of myself as a more superior class”) her awareness of the privilege given to her by being White. But being White, equated with superiority, is *normal*. It is how she has been raised, and that is the way it has been “over the years.”

Sharon discloses in this response how she identifies being White with what she is not. She does not view her whiteness as a cultural definition, “I am . . . not part of an ethnicity.”

2. White is not color:

I am one guilty of unconsciously or naively seeing myself and other White people as not part of an ethnicity. I view that there is the tendency to view other ethnicities as “problem” peoples, as so [sic.] therefore do not see ourselves as an ethnicity. – Sharon

Sharon discloses in this response how she identifies being White with what she is not. She does not view her Whiteness as a cultural definition, “I am . . . not part of an ethnicity.” Furthermore, notice how she differentiates Whiteness from the other, which is not only defined by an ethnicity but by a social problem. The implicit message in her response is: Color is equal to ethnicity and ethnicity equals problem.

3. White is a scientific definition:

In the data collected and analyzed, I did not identify any significant examples that alluded to this rhetorical strategy. None of my students’ responses related race to a scientific definition.

4. White equals American:

I feel very passionate about the fact that we are Americans, and I don’t like when people say that’s not a race or ethnicity. – Kristin

This made me feel very awkward and separate from my own people, and I don’t know how I feel about that idea. To hear myself say ‘my own people’ is odd for me as well. I used to think of ‘my people’ as all Americans no matter what race. This movie made me feel otherwise. – Meg

In these two examples, both Kristin and Meg understand Whiteness as the norm and equate it to being

American. They seem to be unaware of the other races' experience as Americans, too.

5. White is intangible; therefore, it has no labels:

The color of their skin was something I didn't even notice. – Chris

Judge people instead on their values . . . regardless of whom [sic.] you are, not on your color. – Michael

This rhetorical strategy is marked by color-blindness, where the central aspect of the discourse is to identify oneself by one's character. By avoiding racial labels, Michael is masking his own Whiteness. His awareness of his identity formation is defined by his values, yet he does not seem to see the connection between the construction of his values and his White culture.

6. White is acknowledging a symbolic ethnicity:

Euro-Americans, at least by stereotype, are not in touch with their heritage, while many other races of people are. – Dan

In this quote, Dan is aware that European heritage is not a significant descriptor of Whiteness; however, he acknowledges that ethnic or national heritage are important factors in determining the culture of racial minority groups.

In summary, Nakayama and Krizek's (1995) model served as a valuable framework to analyze my students' deconstruction of Whiteness. Each student's responses were classified into one or more of the categories outlined in the model and shed significant insights about their different understandings of Whiteness.

Probably the most interesting meanings of Whiteness that emerged from the data however, did not match the paradigms outlined in Nakayama and Krizek's (1995) model, offering a new perspective. These meanings were: (1) White is not about race: Whiteness is socio-economic power; and (2) Whiteness is not about *being*; Whiteness is about *feeling*.

Kristy wrote:

I also never had seen myself as part of an ethnic race when I was younger, although I was constantly aware of my social class . . . like Whites receive hidden benefits from just being White, but we're not aware of them constantly, like how minorities have to be constantly aware of such things. I never saw myself as a member of a race, nor did I see myself as privileged. I feel being White is to be rich . . . I never felt like I was White.

In this quote, Kristy candidly reflects on how Whiteness, in her experience, was not about skin color; it was about an awareness of privilege, which she relates to

socio-economic status. She never felt White, because she was "constantly aware of her [lower] social class." Interestingly, she relates to the experience of racial minorities because she had to constantly be aware of her underprivileged position. Her understanding of the meaning of Whiteness is socio-economic power.

Throughout my students' responses, I noticed a pattern in how the inessential quality of Whiteness is exposed: Whiteness is not about *being* White; Whiteness is about *feeling*. This is the second additional finding that emerged from the data, raising the question: Can Whiteness be defined as an ontological discourse? Whiteness as *feeling* uncovers subtle, yet important layers of White culture. It exposes the complexities of and unconscious resistance to the social dynamics involved in deconstructing Whiteness.

For example, Stephanie states: "I feel many people of other ethnic groups are racist towards White people. I don't know what I would feel if suddenly I was the minority."

Meg *feels* "awkward and separate from my own people [. . .]. I used to think of 'my people' as all Americans no matter what race, this [documentary] made me feel otherwise."

Rachel *feels* "angry and don't know what it feels to be White anymore."

Justine says: "I felt very uncomfortable . . . I left feeling bad that I am White. I felt guilty that I do not understand what it feels like to be hated for the color of your skin."

Beyond the revelation of these explicit issues, the *feelings* of discomfort and fear permeate throughout these students' responses. Mainly, the discomfort of confronting Whiteness, the fear of losing power and privilege to the other, and the inability to *feel* like or identify with "the other." At a deeper level is fear of "the other" embedded in what it means/feels to be White? Further research on this topic is certainly needed if we are looking for ways to deconstruct dominant cultural paradigms and expand multicultural perspectives in education.

Conclusions

This deconstruction of the meanings of Whiteness was an important experience in guiding these prospective teachers' understanding of their cultural identities. It raised their awareness of what it means to "be" White and their understanding of the role that race plays in defining individuals' cultures, values, and beliefs, especially in regard to "the other." As Lauren summarizes:

As a White person, by not acknowledging the privileges and advantages I have over people of color, I am contributing to the racial barrier that exists in our society.

The problem is that White individuals are not aware . . . I have gained insights about myself . . . [and] how difficult it will be to work with students coming from different races and cultures that I may not understand.

Chris reflects:

Yet in realizing and being aware of such [racial conflicts], we might enable our students to develop strategies to tackle them. What are these strategies?

Ashley also reflects:

When people are not given the opportunity to grow up with people who are different, then they tend to become scared of the unknown and do not want to associate with others [. . .] raising awareness among children about the different cultures in the world can be a step to break those barriers.

These final testimonies reveal an emergence of an awareness of Whiteness as the dominant discourse and the need to deconstruct, reconstruct, and recreate it as a way to open education to multicultural perspectives. This experience just laid the foundation for a step in this direction, but it is a fundamental step in the process of recreating American schools for a more equitable educational experience for all.

References

- Allen, R. L. (1999). *The hidden curriculum of whiteness: White teachers, White territory, and White community*. ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading, English, and Communication. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service no. ED 434168).
- Applebaum, B. (2005). In the name of morality: Moral responsibility, Whiteness, and social justice education. *Journal of Moral Education, 34*(3), 277–290.
- Banks, J. A. (2002). *An introduction to multicultural education*. (3rd ed.). Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Banks, J. A. (2006). *Cultural diversity and education: Foundations, curriculum, and teaching*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Dalton, H. (2002). Failing to see. In P. Rothenberg (Ed.), *White privilege: Essential readings on the other side of racism*. New York: Worth.
- Franklin, J. (2001). The diverse challenges of multiculturalism. *Education Update, 43*(2), 1–8.
- Garcia, E. (2002). *Student cultural diversity: Understanding and meeting the challenge*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Glesne, C. (2006). *Becoming qualitative researchers*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Howard, G. (1999). *We can't teach what we don't know: White teachers, multiracial schools*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- IES National Center for Education Statistics. (2005). *Youth Indicators, 2005*. Retrieved December 7, 2006, from <http://nces.ed.gov/programs/youthindicators/Indicators.asp?PubPageNumber=2>.
- Kaufmann, J. (2001). Making meaning of Whiteness. *Educational Studies, 32*(1), 96.
- Koppelman, K. L. (2008). *Understanding human differences: Multicultural education for a diverse America*. Boston: Pearson.
- McIntosh, P. (1995). White privilege and male privilege: A personal account of coming to see correspondence through work in women's studies. In M. Anderson and P. Collins (Eds.), *Race, class, and gender: An anthology*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- McIntosh, P. (1997). White privilege: Unpacking the invisible knapsack. In V. Cyrus (Ed.), *Experiencing race, class, and gender* (2nd ed., pp. 194–198). Mountain View, CA: Mayfield.
- Nakayama T. K., & Krizek, R. L. (1995). Whiteness: A strategic rhetoric. *Quarterly Journal of Speech, 81*, 291–309.
- Pearson, K. (2000). "The color of fear" project. Retrieved November 6, 2004, from http://uss.intrasun.tcnj.edu/discussion_boards/color_of_fear/
- Sheets, R. H. (2001). Whiteness and White identity in multicultural education. *Multicultural Education, 8*(3), 38–40.
- Sheets, R. H. (2005). *Diversity pedagogy: Examining the role of culture in the teaching-learning process*. Boston: Pearson Allyn and Bacon.
- Silverman, D. (1993). *Interpreting qualitative data: Methods for analyzing talk, text and interaction*. London: Sage.
- U.S. Census Bureau's Population Division. (2001). The Census 2000 School District Tabulation (STP2). Retrieved December 7, 2006, from <http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/sdds/tablemain.asp>
- Wah, L. M. (1994). *The color of fear*. [Documentary]. United States: Stir Fry Productions.

