Racial Discovery Class: Be Color Bold

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41 st Annual NITOP January 3–6, 2019, St. Pete Beach, Florida

Fifty-one years after the Civil Rights act and sixty-one years after *Brown vs. The Board of Education* great racial disparities still exist in America. Forbes reports that the median white household had $111,146 in wealth holdings in 2011, compared to $7,113 for the median black household (Shin, 2015). Asked if they believe racism against blacks is wide spread in the U. S. 50% of Whites and 80% of Blacks answered yes (Gallup, 2015.)  In the U.S., 74% of black students attend majority nonwhite schools (50-100% minority), and 38% attend intensely segregated schools (those with only 0-10% of whites students) (Orfield, Kucera & Hawley 2012.)

Psychology now knows that a great deal of our behavior and attitudes are based on automatic associations made outside of awareness (Khaneman, 2011). Thus, many people insist that they have no racial bias and are unaware of their biases. Dovidio (Mitchel, 2015) stated that while whites often believe they are color blind and don’t see race, their biases are pervasive and have a huge pernicious effect on blacks. The Implicit Association Test (Banaji & Greenwald, 2013) demonstrated that when measured in such a way that they could not choose a conscious answer, the majority (about 75%) of Americans showed a preference for whites over blacks. Thus, while “Explicit bias is infrequent; implicit bias is pervasive.” (Banaji & Greenwald, 2013, p. 208.) Even black subjects showed an implict preference for white over black (Cohen’s d = .16) though smaller than that for whites (Cohen’s D = .83) (Nosek, B. A., Banaji, M. R., & Greenwald, A. G. 2002).

Banks, R. R., Eberhardt, J. L. and Ross, L. (2006) writing in the California Law Review delineated the strong evidence for the role implicit bias in the inequitable treatment African-Americans face in interactions with the police, arrests, convictions and sentencing.

Previously we had some success in reducing bias in small groups that discussed race. Students found the experience enjoyable and rewarding and seemed to experience changes in their views about race. Because the earlier groups all involved volunteers receiving no external rewards; attendance was problematic. We were able to create a college class with academic credit to give students more incentive to attend and to write about their experiences. We hoped that the continuity would lead to group cohesion and a more meaningful change.

**Method**

After obtaining approval from the IRB, we offered a three-hour special topics psychology course entitled Racial Discover Group. Students received an explanation of the process, referral information about the university counseling center and signed informed consents and permission to use their words anonymously in research. We have now done this for three terms.

Class met once a week as a lecture class examining contributions from the psychology literature to the problem of racism in America. The second meeting of the week was a 90-minute group session with a white professor and black graduate student as co-leaders.

Students were told that the goal of the group was to understand race relations in America from the view of a different race. We emphasized that it was not a debate. In addition, students were encouraged to take part in every session but not to dominate the group. We were very successful in having everyone involved with no monopolists.

At the first group meeting we watched a TED video by Mellody Hobson (2014) entitled: *Color blind or color brave?* She discussed the existing racial disparities, the social proscriptions against discussion of race and the need for dialog to break down barriers between the races.

Students read three books: *The Other Wes Moore* (Moore 2012) and *Devil in the Grove* (King 2012). The first class also read *Whistling Vivaldi* (Steele, 2010) which students found pedantic so we switched to *High Price* (Hart, 2013) for the second class and *The Bridge to Brilliance (*Lopez, 2016) for the third group. They were quizzed weekly on the readings. The first class was quizzed on the assigned reading at the beginning of class. We switched to on-line quizzes on Blackboard for the second two classes. Reading was much better in the first class. Every two weeks students submitted two-page reaction papers about their experience in the group, the readings and class material. At the end of the semester each student created a project to be placed on a web site for the class.

An unexpected bonus to the group involved one member creating a private Facebook page where the students and co-leaders could post stories and videos relating to race. Nearly everyone posted items and most read them. The Facebook page was a nice way for some members who were shy to add more to the group and was retained for classes two and three. The second class seemed to really embrace the Facebook page but the third class less so.

**Results**

Due to the small sample size we did not attempt to capture quantitative data, however the reaction papers per student provide an abundance of qualitative data. With analytical reading of the papers six themes appeared in the first group. (see appendix A for examples of student comments) appeared: 1. Group was enjoyable, 2. Discomfort was present but manageable and students felt Safe, 3. Group led to Awareness of issues and others, 4. Racism as a continuing problem, 5. Group led to Empowerment, 6. Students felt they had changed beliefs.

The most dramatic and clear message was that student greatly enjoyed the group discussion. Most students expressed some hesitancy and trepidation about just what group would be like. However, from the very first papers the students expressed strong positive comments about the experience (see Enjoyed Group in Appendix A). The positive nature of the experience was even more strongly endorsed toward the end of the semester when students expressed sadness at the end of the term. It is a rare and rewarding experience for a professor to have students express so much gratitude for the academic experience.

Based on our experience with group therapy we knew that students would approach group with some trepidation and it would be heightened by the touchy subject matter of race. By having an intact group meet over time we expected students to get support and be able to handle the anxiety. This proved to be the case with the shared anxiety leading to a sense of universality and strengthening the bond.

It was gratifying to see the way students gained a new awareness of issues around race. For the white students this usually meant a first time awareness of the very different experience black students have in society. Black students frequently expressed surprise and appreciation that white members of the group cared very much about the injustices once they became aware of them. As awareness grew the sense of group cohesion, or the value each member placed on the group, increased. Attendance was very good and nearly everyone expressed an eagerness for each group session. Krausa, Ruckerb and Richeson, (2017) reported that whites greatly underestimate race-based economic inequity. It was clear in our group that most of the white students knew very little of the racial issues in the country. Videos of police violence and anti-black behavior helped students become more aware. Even more powerful were stories told by class members. One student talked about older white customers avoiding her checkout line at the grocery store of refusing to place money in her hand. The white members, including the leader, were astonished that such behavior occurs.

We created this class before the white supremacist violence in Charlottesville, Virginia and the controversy over non-violent protests in the form of kneeling during the national anthem. My sense is that the problem of police violence is confined to the black community and that few whites are aware of it. That was certainly confirmed in this class.

The student members of the group were all approximately 20 years-old. Often they were having difficulty dealing with family values that conflicted with their own nascent views. For example, whites and blacks alike stated that their parents and grandparents were much less inclined to be open to the other race. They spoke of the great emotional strain of trying to develop a belief and to express it among family and friends. There was also a lot of discussion of the issue of complicity. We spoke often of the appropriate response when we encounter racist behavior. Group members at the very least were able to solidify their own beliefs about equality and the value of diversity in their lives. Nearly all spoke of growing from the experience in class.

Perhaps the most gratifying result of the group was that students appeared to have an emotional as well as a cognitive experiences relating to a change in their beliefs. Many authors speak to the difficulty of changing beliefs, especially implicit bias. It may be that the strong interpersonal relationships formed in the group will make the changes less vulnerable to contrary assertions.

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**Appendix A: Verbatim quotes from student papers\***

**Enjoyed Group**

* So far I have extremely enjoyed being a part of this open racial discussion class
* Even with only two classes I have fully enjoyed myself and think participating has been one of my best choices in life.
* Overall this group and class discussions were great and I now feel more comfortable after the second group because we covered more issues that no one in society really wants to bring up.
* After watching the video, I became excited about the class and began to look forward to discovering biases that I didn’t even realize I had.
* I honestly am ecstatic that I signed up to take this class because even the race is so hard to talk about it definitely needs to be.
* I absolutely love this discussion class.
* From the first Friday we had I knew I would like this class because of the video we watched about the woman talking about color blind and color bold.
* I am so glad i decided to take this class.
* This is my final year of undergrad and I have not enjoyed a class as much as I did this one in a very long time.
* My reaction to the first group meeting is very good because I was able to listen and here the opinions of my peers about how they feel about racism in the world today
* These past two weeks groups have been fun as well as very informative on things going on in the world.
* I honestly hate this class is ending soon because I’m going to miss everybody so much and the bond that we have created in this group.
* I am sad that our class is coming to an end. While I haven’t always enjoyed feeling uncomfortable in our group settings, I have learned a tremendous amount
* I can’t believe this semester is about to be over. I never really care, but this semester we have bonded and gotten to know either other on a personal level.
* I have gotten a lot from the class and would love to be able to bring this experience to the world.
* But as always I have enjoyed group the past two weeks! I already missed the fact that we didn’t have class yesterday because of course I have a story to tell!
* This is my final year of undergrad and I have not enjoyed a class as much as I did this one.

**Discomfort**

* Meeting the group at first was awkward.
* Going into it, I did not know what to expect about this class.
* Walking into class on the first day I was unsure if I had made the right decision.
* Last Monday in our group I could feel all the discomfort I have been trying to avoid.
* The first day of group I was nervous because I’m not the type of person to just come out and start talking to people and especially on a topic like this.
* I was a little nervous on the first day of group. I didn't know what to say or not to say. I realized that was the reason I was on this class in the first place.
* Sometimes I feel worried that my comments may seem small minded to the others in the group
* I was so excited but nervous all at the same time, and I wasn't sure what to expect
* I was worried about saying something that may come out the wrong way or offend one someone in the group.

**Feeling safe**

* The first meeting made me feel safe. It was like a burden of social standards were lifted off my shoulders and I could begin to say all the things I was afraid to say before, out loud.
* It is a class unlike anything else. Finally, I have a real safe space with people who understand how I feel and feel similarly.
* Hearing those words from a caucasian individual had a completely different impact.
* Our second group meeting went really good. I can tell we are getting comfortable with each other.
* Lynn asked as a black person what stereotype bothered us the most. I know that took a lot to ask that question but I'm glad she did. To me it broke the ice of questions to ask

**Awareness**

* Many people including myself don’t even realize the biases they have against another race.
* When I was growing up I didn’t see race as an issue until I started high school.
* I think that the police department who were on the defense probably thought they did nothing wrong
* Being able to talk about these issues has allowed me to identify some microaggression and racial biases I use,
* As Mellody stated in her video the first step to change any form of change is awareness.
* Once our class defined microaggressions I feel like I have been seeing the world in new eyes.
* . For the first time, I had really understood why people of color were so frustrated.
* Knowing now that where I am sharing from, and where my classmates are sharing from is not a place of hate but of misconceived perceptions.
* Also I love how this class is helping us realize some of the things we do are racist and we don’t even realize we are doing it.
* However in this group, there were people with different skin tones and they felt as strongly as I did about the abuse and hated shown by certain police officers. Hearing those words from a caucasian individual had a completely different impact.
* Sadness overcomes me when I realize that people truly believe that everyone is given the same opportunities
* Many people get the wrong meaning behind this which is something that more people should want and try to understand.
* After our discussion my eyes were really opened
* In order to make a change and correct racial inequalities, others must first recognize there needs to be a change.
* Much like how this group has opened my eyes to some of the biased thoughts I have had about black people my whole life.
* In my mind, a huge part of why people don’t understand and know their implicit biases is because they are uneducated about what it truly means to be biased.
* This relates to our class because it has already opened my eyes to so many issues that I need to be aware of.
* Until Monday I felt that my view of black people had no negative connotations
* I speak for myself when I say I see things differently now.

**Racism is still a problem**

* In my opinion, police officers should provide black citizens with the same respect that they do for white citizens.
* Just like the situation I dealt with when I tried to date a white boy and his mom said he couldn’t date me because I was half black. That really hurt my feelings because that’s something I can’t control and I really hate that his mom thinks that way because it’s sad.
* To think that these things happen to people almost everyday breaks my heart.
* One of the most interesting topics discussed was regarding police brutality against african americans. This is something that thousands of americans experience everyday
* Liberty and justice for all is not honored in the United States.
* That just makes me think that some people think that as a black person you can't have anything nice.
* This sounded crazy to me at first because how can someone just disown their own family because of race?
* Sad enough to say when I became of dating age my Granny specifically told me that if I were to mix races in marriage that she would disown me.
* a white woman was approached by a Ku Klux Klan member at the gas station.
* These past two weeks with the experiences with my friend’s families and friends have been hurtful. It’s crazy how much racism I’ve been around and continue to be around
* . One thing that really shocked me about that video was when the white lady yelled out “go trump”. He has nothing to do with the reason they are protesting. To me this shows that people know what he stands for and some of them agree with it. I still can’t believe people are still for him and what he stands for.
* Unfortunately, before this class, I would have most likely agreed with someone that professed racism was dead
* I am happy that others see the amount of hatred between people that I have seen in the world. I am not happy about the hatred that we are seeing, but I am happy that it is being acknowledged
* When asking my group how they view themselves in the aspect of biases all stated they were not racist, and most of their families had grown up very southern minded and biased.

**Empowerment**

* When I hear some racial comment at the dinner table I want to speak up.
* Race is a hard topic to discuss without offending somebody and I feel as if this class is teaching us how to discuss racism without causing problems.
* I was so hopeful in being to do something I created steps to maybe changing someone else's mind. In the future, maybe even someone in my own family
* The both made me want to change the world.
* though this conversation was not about race, I felt compelled to speak up about stereotypes
* The purpose of this class for me, it to understand so that in return I can begin a forever path to find peace between races.
* To me color bold means seeing racist things and not ignore them but stepping in and making a difference.
* I’m nowhere near perfect but I’m strongly against racism.
* I left discussion this week with a new quote that I love though and it’s “you have to teach people how to treat you”.
* I think I have grown a lot since I started this class at the beginning of the semester
* This class has taught me many things, from standing up for what I believe to understanding and looking at things from different points of views. I see myself as a better person, I see things differently now
* This group has really made me feel empowered to make a chance in society and to speak up for what is not right. It has allowed me to listen but also speak up for myself.
* We used a quote in group that really stuck to me. “You have to teach people how to treat you.” This is almost like a motto for the group in my eyes. It encourages me to form my own beliefs and opinions and stick to them and not to be easily swayed.
* If I can learn anything from this class it is that I can be a change in the injustice around me. I can move my seat to where a black table is, I can give people an opportunity that others may not

**Changed my mind**

* Before I took this course I was definitely close-minded in how I thought about the opinions of others. Before I took this class I honestly felt that white people did not really care about racism because it does not affect them. I felt like they all felt like racism was not even a problem anymore. When I took the class I found out that a lot of whites actually do realize that it is a big part of people like me everyday life. My classmates showed a lot of compassion for me when I talked about my fear of cops specifically. It really made me feel good to realize that they actually cared about how blacks and others are affected by racism.
* Before this class, I thought that the majority just did not care about African Americans being murdered by corrupt police forces. While I am sure this does apply to some people, a large portion is just unaffected and unaware. This is not their fault. But the more people that are aware, more people can bring light to these issues and help fight against the hate. Overall, I was able to have open ended discussions with people on the topics of race, police brutality, biases, and general discrimination
* Before entering this course, I knew that racism was once a huge issue for African Americans, but I had no idea how much of an issue it still is even today. I’m grateful for the experience and wisdom I gained from the discussions… This class has enlightened me on the racial tension and abuse that still exist in our country today. I believe that many are simply unaware that this is still such a common struggle for so many
* I also hope I am able to keep the knowledge from this class in my head to keep forming the opinions I need to form.
* This class has given me much more insight on race and the effects that we can have on people just from planting a little seed that can turn into something big. I also learned that we have these implicit biases we have without even acknowledging it at times. This made me more aware of the things I thought whenever I would go places and to not be so judgmental at times.
* I never considered myself to be a racist person but after this class I’ve realized by not being a part of the solution to stop these issues I was being a part of the problem…. Because of this group I have decided to do my part to make people unware of racial injustice that is still going on in our country and encourage them to be a part of the solution.
* I have become more aware of stereotyping, microaggressions, and prejudice from friends, family and myself.
* My mind is even more open, and I have learned that I can have a conversation with others who have completely different views but remain objective and calm when discussing a topic as sensitive as race

\*any names changed for anonymity