Racial Discovery Class: Be Color Bold

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

The recent death of President George H. W. Bush called attention to the persistence and pervasiveness of racism in America. It is ironic that he is considered a moderate despite having opposed the Civil Rights act and having won election in the infamous Willie Horton campaign. In defending his vote against the bill that would end job discrimination and segregation if public places he said: “The new civil-rights act was passed to protect 14 percent of the people, I’m also worried about the other 86 percent.” (Rohr, 2018) That campaign relied on America’s fears of black men to sweep him into office on the votes of white racists and separatists without having to admit his prejudice. It suggests a racist society that he could he boast that he was concerned about protecting the rights of the other 86% to legally segregate and discriminate in hiring based on skin color. (Rohr, 2018)

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. From 1996 to 2016 the percent of black students attending segregated school rose from 59% to 71%. (Stancil, 2018). The median wealth for white families in the U. S. is $144,200 as compared to $11,200 for blacks (Vega, 2016). Not only is this discrepancy a huge problem but much of society is unaware of it (Badger, 2017). Researchers at Yale University asked subjects to guess what the discrepancy was. Both blacks and whites but especially wealthier whites greatly underestimated the difference. (Krause, Rucker and Richeson, 2017).

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. They 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 and viewing videos relevant to the subject. 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 first and second classes 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. 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. (Wattles & Manners, 2018)

The second and third classes returned similar results and we learned some new things as well. Four new and overlapping categories stood out including 1. Everyone participates, 2. Critical Thinking, 3. Class is non-threatening and 4. Class is fun. Examples of these categories are included in Table A.

Another thing we learned is that the group experience on this subject is powerful even in the face of less than optimal conditions. Recruitment has always been difficult because of the small number wanted. We tend to let it spread by word of mouth and try to control enrollment so that we will have a racial split. It feels uncomfortable to ask for students of one particular race to enroll. In the case of the most recent class due to perfect storm of drops and other conditions we ended up with only one white student in a class of six. We also missed some groups due to Labor Day and two hurricanes. Nevertheless, students found the experience valuable. One African-American wrote “I know that I will always remember the topics we have discussed and the positive impact the class/group has had on me. I will always cherish the bond that I have made with every individual in the class/group and hope to stay in contact when the semester has ended.” A second black student who was very quiet in class said “This class is an experience every college student should be required to experience. Learning how to be color bold has truly benefited me and opened my eyes.” This student’s comments were especially enlightening because she had been very quiet in group. Her positive comments suggest that we may overestimate the harm in not participating more.

Because people are often unaware of the biases (Kahneman, 2011) simple informative lectures may be insufficient to reduce prejudice. We have developed a group experience that allows for change at an intuitive level. Classes continue to demonstrate the importance of the group experience. One student powerfully wrote “The frustration of truly being hated for just the color of your skin is a pain and frustration like no other one.” A black male wrote that “Although during class I was a bit exhausted I still can say from the things said in the classroom that this course is the one I look forward to most.” Another student demonstrated the importance of the group with her comment that “I think I am discovering that I was afraid to talk initially because I had the impression that all African American people hated me for being white and only expected bad things from me.” In a common theme she added “I came into this class eager to learn about others and how to help them, but I have accidentally learned how to help myself.”

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

**Class is fun**

* Not to mention like I said, the class doesn’t feel like a true class does so I don’t have that looming stress hanging over me dreading the next visit. I truly feel excited to go each week and that’s also partly due to the welcoming environment you have created.
* I have absolutely loved this class so far. We have only had one discussion and I am completely over the moon for it.
* It has only been two weeks of group discussions, and I can honestly say I thoroughly enjoy the class and the discussions
* We had wonderful discussions these first two weeks.
* I have to say, so far this is my favorite class because when it comes to racism I am passionate about it.
* This class is an experience every college student should be required to experience. Learning how to be color bold has truly benefited me and opened my eyes.

**Non-threatening**

* I have only been to one discussion this semester and I have realized that you can have a comfortable, peaceful, and respectful conversation about race with the people who don’t share your skin color.
* It shocked me how open everyone was about their family life. I especially shocked myself with how open I was with the group about my family’s racist past
* I look forward to asking more questions and speaking less with the waning of my nervousness. I am looking forward to being closer friends with all of the people in the Friday group.
* Overall the class/group is thriving immensely
* We struggled and fought so hard, it feels like being black is a crime and we feel like in the eyes of Caucasians we are automatically guilty even though we personally know that we did not do anything wrong

**Critical Thinking**

* I feel like a genuine conversation that’s pushing the envelope has many people inputting opinion at very passionate and unplanned moments. When a talking stick is introduced, or any talking object for that matter, you sort of take away that passionate interjection of ideas or emotions someone may feel.
* The statement that they made seemed very anti-white to me. Or at least I think it was ant-white. I am not 100 percent sure that I even know what anti-white is. … I realize that I am a very blessed individual who has had a lot of help in this world from my skin color
* Two different views of the same reality they are facing in the book. I believe that corresponds to the relations we all share in this Racial Diversity class.
* After we all read through the article we began our discussion on whether or not we believed the officer should have apologized.
* It is a great course for critical thinking as well. The beauty of the class is that every student is intelligent enough to not debate with one another, but genuinely listen to their peers.
* The fact that we often end up realizing we agree strengthens my idea that a discussion aimed at understanding is often all that is needed to help clear the air on many issues.

**Everyone Participates**

* Nobody just blocked out or overlooked what anyone else said. We had a true open discussion and heard everyone out equally on every topic they brought up to the group.
* Joe really surprised me once he began to really speak as well. He’s always been crazy quiet in all the classes I’ve shared with him. Not to mention, when he was in this class at the beginning he never really spoke.
* I enjoyed listening to everyone’s stance on the topic of race.
* I am taking this class to hear other people’s views and understand why things differ between white and black people. I hope that I can learn some new things from my peers.
* It was nice to hear the comments from black and white people, together, in the same room. My first discussion was a very unique experience because otherwise I would have never been comfortable using the word black in front of black people to describe skin color
* I hope that no matter where I work, I will always remember this class, so that I can continue to make sure people of color feel comfortable when they’re around me.

\*any names changed for anonymity