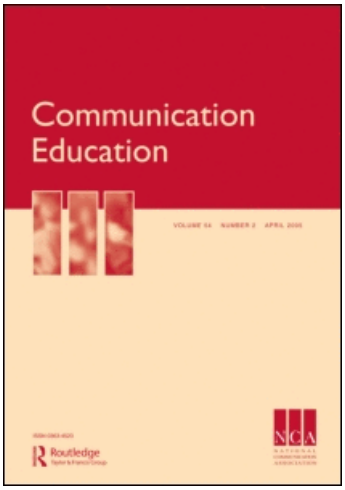

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Communicating to Develop White Racial Identity in an Interracial Communication Class

Ann Neville Miller, & Tina M. Harris

The study examines the dilemmas communicated by White students as they addressed issues of whiteness raised in an undergraduate interracial communication course. Data included semester-long in-class observation, three focus groups of White students from the class, and student documents. Communication patterns associated with dealing with White privilege, defining an antiracist lifestyle, and becoming comfortable with communicating about race were identified. Reasons for and response to white student silence in diversity-related courses are discussed.

Keywords: Whiteness; White Racial Identity; Instructional Communication; Interracial Communication; Multicultural Education

Over the past 15 years, whiteness studies have gathered momentum (Frankenberg, 1997), shifting the focus of racial discourse in the U.S. from the discrimination suffered by people of color to an analysis of the way White domination perpetuates itself in society (Proweller, 1999; Wander, Martin, & Nakayama, 2000). As Kapoor (2000) stated, those on the margins of power have received long overdue attention, but the center remains poorly comprehended.

In response to these critiques, and probably also because the majority of students in such courses are White, a major learning objective for diversity-related courses in recent years has been to assist White students in developing an awareness of what their whiteness means in their daily lives (Martin & Davis, 2001; McMillen, 1995). White students may be used to thinking that privilege in the U.S. is awarded on the basis of merit (Giroux, 2003). To consider that racism is institutionalized, that simply

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having light skin affords them opportunities not available to people of color, or that justice might be better served by the realistic recognition of race than by attempting to be "colorblind," requires a paradigm shift for many. Instructors hope to see White students move from thinking of racism as something individual, malicious, overt, and possibly exaggerated by people of color, to seeing it as a pervasive reality that they themselves have a responsibility to address.

The purpose of the present study was to explore the communicative actions in which White students engaged over a semester-long university interracial communication course as they grappled with dilemmas related to their own racial identity. Furthermore, by investigating patterns of interaction within the classroom, it was hoped that a better understanding of the role of the instructor as a facilitator of growth would also emerge. To lay the foundation for our findings, we begin by reviewing aspects of whiteness studies that most frequently receive attention in diversity-related courses. We then consider associated pedagogical techniques.

A Brief Look at Whiteness

As presented in classes and in scholarly literature, what is perhaps most striking about whiteness as a social force is that it is nearly invisible. At the turn of the Millennium, many Whites in the U.S. simply do not think much about their race, and the rhetorical systems that maintain a White-dominant environment are as subtle as they are powerful (Nakayama & Krizek, 1999). Although the backlash toward affirmative action in recent years has occasionally raised their identity as Whites to consciousness (Giroux, 1997, 2003), U.S. citizens of European descent typically think of themselves simply as Americans. Racially speaking, White is not a color. An easy demonstration of this can be conducted by asking university students to write down ten descriptors of themselves on a sheet of paper. One of the authors recently observed this exercise in an upper-level undergraduate class. Out of five Black students, only one did not write her race as a defining factor of her identity, whereas not a single one out of approximately 15 White students listed his/her race. This phenomenon is possible only for members of the dominant group in a society, whose position of power enables them to view their own characteristics and behaviors (albeit often unconsciously) as the norm by which others are measured (Martin, Krizek, Nakayama, & Bradford, 1996; Sleeter, 1995). (We should note that the experience of whiteness in postcolonial White-dominated cultures such as South Africa is likely to be quite different, and not nearly as subtle. See Steyn, 2000.)

As Whites tend not to see themselves as racial beings, they are also often not cognizant of the systematic privileges they enjoy. In a frequently cited metaphor, MacIntosh (1998) likened White privilege to a knapsack with all sorts of advantages tucked inside that Whites carry about with them unaware. For example, they can do well in a challenging situation without being called "a credit to their race"; they are never asked to speak for their racial group; when they watch the mass media, they regularly see people of their own race in roles they can identify with. A key construct in the study of whiteness is that discourse in the mass media, in government, and

even in the homes of majority group members is constructed so as to maintain this privileged position.

In some literature and some classrooms, White privilege (or, more strongly, White racism) has been viewed as nearly the sum total of White racial identity (e.g., Frankenberg, 1997). Other scholars (Giroux, 1997; Kincheloe, 1999; Tatum, 1994) believe that to adequately address student needs, the study of whiteness must go beyond identifying and condemning racism. Students who accept the reality of White privilege frequently struggle with individual and collective guilt (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1998). If they are given no positive guidance on constructive actions to take, students may attempt to assuage their extreme discomfort by completely denying their race and immersing themselves in Black or other oppressed cultures. Alternatively, they may become so concerned with not appearing racist that they shun interracial interaction all together (Crouteau, 1999). Or, tired of being labeled "the oppressor," they may resist learning about race and racism and actually become more prejudiced. As Tatum (1994) has observed, feeling responsible for generations of oppression by one's race is a burden no one can carry for long. Therefore, rather than leaving students to select from these three unsatisfactory White identities ("wigger," guilty White, or racist), authors like Giroux (1997) have called for a pedagogy that establishes a positive position of Whiteness.

Whiteness in the Classroom

As scholarly thought regarding whiteness and White racial identity has gelled, a canon of accepted techniques for teaching whiteness has also developed. Most courses that contain substantial units on whiteness are structured along the lines of what Foeman (1991) has labeled the "groupwork model." Such classes use a plethora of methods to bring new information to the participants, who are then expected to work through the material together. In line with over a half century of research on characteristics of intergroup contact as a tool for reducing prejudice (see Rubin & Lannutti, 2001, for a review), instructors generally attempt to provide a cooperative as opposed to a competitive intergroup atmosphere, impose an artifice of equal status for all class members, create opportunities for forging personal friendship between groups, and articulate a clear institutional endorsement of multicultural values.

For multicultural classes to bring about prejudice reduction it is essential to establish a safe environment in which students know that they can express emotions, personal struggles, and disagreement, and still be accepted in the class (Caudill, 1998; Orbe & Harris, 2001). Personal and vulnerable sharing by the instructor is seen as a way of modeling thoughtful engagement with issues (Locke & Kiselica, 1999). According to Cochran-Smith (1995), in her classes ". . . the teacher is facilitator and fellow traveler rather than shrewd influencer or even artful manager of students' responses to competing claims" (p. 560). Many courses extend class dialogue by having students keep a journal or complete some other reflective writing assignment (Lawrence & Bunche, 1996; Walker, 1993). Cross-cultural simulations such as Bafa-bafa, videos, and other in-class activities are likewise standard fare (Colville-Hall,

MacDonald, & Smolen, 1995; DeTurk, 2001), providing yet further opportunity for students to discuss their feelings and experiences. (For suggested readings on whiteness for communication classes, see Martin & Davis, 2001.)

Some course and program evaluations suggest that coursework designed to decrease racism and promote the development of a positive White racial identity is in some measure achieving its goals (Brown, Parham, & Yonker, 1996; Lawrence & Bunche, 1996; Tatum, 1994). Multicultural courses in general, many of which contain substantial units on whiteness, are associated with positive student attitude change (e.g., Astin, 1993; Carrell, 1997; Chang, 2002; Henderson-King & Kaleta, 2000). However, because much of this research is devoted to analyzing student outcomes through self-reports on attitude scales at the end of the term, it provides little information about the processes White students go through in raising their racial position to consciousness and working through its implications. Nor does this body of learning outcome research offer insight about whether typical pedagogical techniques are truly encouraging the intergroup communication process that is their stated goal (Engberg, 2004).

In order to address these issues, this study draws on two divergent streams of thought. The first of these is the conceptualization of White identity in terms of stages of development (e.g., Banks, 1995; Hardiman, 2001; Helms, 1995). Originating primarily in the field of counseling, these models are now used across a variety of disciplines as a framework for conceptualizing what White students go through as they encounter whiteness pedagogy. Most frequently invoked among them is Helms' White Racial Identity Development (WRID) model, which proposes two overarching tasks that Whites must accomplish in order to attain a healthy White racial identity, encompassing six sequential stages, or statuses. First, they must abandon racism, moving from (1) having low awareness of racism (*contact*), to (2) feeling guilty and uncertain about their racial position (*disintegration)*, then (3) reacting by placing the onus of racism on the victims (*reintegration*). If these stages are accomplished, the second overarching task is to define a positive identity, which is accomplished through (4) beginning to seek friendships with people of color or nonracist Whites (*pseudoindependence*), and (5) beginning to advocate for racial justice (*immersion*). Ultimately, (6) increased racial consciousness is suffused throughout all areas of life (*autonomy*).

Helms' model is not without its critics, who have suggested among other things that there is no evidence, other than the ideological preferences of the authors, that Whites follow an orderly progression of stages in developing an identity; that the WRID is limited by its emphasis on White–Black identity issues to the exclusion of other groups; and that rather than explaining how Whites establish a racial identity, it describes the development of attitudes toward other racial groups (Abrams, O'Connor, & Giles, 2003; Behrens, 1997; Rowe, Bennett, & Atkinson, 1994). With few exceptions (e.g., Tatum, 1992), research has not tested the applicability of the WRID to student experiences in multicultural courses. Nevertheless, the WRID remains a popular feature in many multicultural courses, and it is therefore important to examine its appropriateness.

In its insistence on the invisibility and pervasiveness of whiteness in U.S. society, the present study is also informed by the broad assumptions of critical pedagogy, the perspective from which investigations of the construction of social identity within the classroom have largely been undertaken (e.g., Hendrix, Jackson, & Warren, 2003; Warren, 2001). Of special relevance to the present investigation is Cooks' (2003) analysis of student papers and focus-group conversations from an interracial communication class. Referring to Davies and Harre's (1990) discussion of positionality of narrative, she identified three categories of student responses to being confronted with evidence of racial privilege: adopting (positioning themselves as responsible for their own whiteness), disregarding (focusing on others as the ones who need enlightenment), and resistance. The present study diverges from Cooks' work by viewing power as only one among several motivators for student communication and silence, and by analyzing not only various forms of student self-report but also results of a semester-long field observation. It is therefore able to focus not only on White student feelings about identity negotiation, but also their enactment of it.

Method

The study employed an ethnographic-style case study methodology as a means of exploring naturally occurring communicative practices (Carbaugh & Hastings, 1992) and providing thick description (Geertz, 1973) of the ways students wrestled with racial realities.

Participants and Instructional Context

Research took place in an upper-level undergraduate Interracial Communication class at a large Southern state university. The class is offered annually as one of several options for fulfilling a campus-wide diversity requirement. Course units included stereotyping/prejudice, interracial relationships, racial identity, among others. There were 50 students in the class: 34 females and 16 males. The ethnic composition was 36 Whites, ten African Americans, one student from India, one White/Chinese biracial student, one African American/Korean biracial student, and one White/Malaysian biracial student. Eight of the White students identified themselves ethnically as Jewish. The instructor of the class, one of the researchers, is an African American female. The other researcher is a White female.

Data Collection

In concordance with Engberg's (2004) assertion that qualitative studies of the impact of multicultural coursework should rely on multiple forms of data to enhance their validity, three sources of data were used in this study: observation, focus groups, and student documents. The principal researcher observed approximately 40 hours of class. The second author, as instructor of the course, attended all class sessions.

The project was introduced to the class at the beginning of the semester as a study on effective ways of teaching interracial communication. The class was assured that no indications of their identities would be recorded. All students gave written permission for their interaction to be recorded under these conditions and also for two essay assignments on racial identity to be cited anonymously.

Because the instructor was concerned that the presence of recording equipment would inhibit student discussion, observation was recorded through field notes (Spano, 2001). It was easy for an observer to blend into the large class and take copious notes without causing discomfort among students. It was impossible, of course, to capture every utterance verbatim as class discussions unfolded, but an attempt was made to record the substance of every discussion talk turn with occasional quotes (no notes were taken on instructor lectures). In addition, the instructor kept field note memos regarding her own impressions. Researchers met weekly. The primary researcher accumulated over 100 pages of field notes, and each researcher had around 30 pages of reflective memos.

Focus groups of seven to ten White students each were held at the end of the semester. One group consisted of self-identifying Jewish students, and two of other White students. In all, about two-thirds of the White students in the class volunteered to participate in the focus groups. No class credit was given for participation. The groups were audio taped, and the tapes transcribed. Students were assured that the instructor would not listen to the tapes until after she handed in the grades for the course.

Student documents analyzed for the study were a one-page "comfort level' assessment assigned at the beginning of the semester, in which students were to describe their feelings on communicating about race in the classroom, and a six-to-eight page reflection paper on their own racial identity, due at the end of the semester. These documents, totaling over 400 pages of text, were examined after the semester was over.

Data Analysis

Recognizing that the instructor of the course would inevitably bring strong expectations with her to the data, analysis was conducted solely by the other researcher. The researcher applied the iterative focus characteristic of Glaser and Strauss's (1967) grounded theory (see also Lincoln & Guba, 1986; Lindlof, 1995). At the end of the semester, she conducted "open coding" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) in a line-by-line analysis of the field notes. Coding schemes were developed, tested, and revised until ultimately three major categories of tensions with which White students struggled were identified, within each of which specific communication patterns were observed.

Once themes for coding were established, field notes and focus group transcripts were coded by thought units. The assignment for the student paper involved making individual application of course materials, so references to students' personal experiences and thoughts were inextricably mixed with other material. Entire papers,

rather than thought units, were therefore treated as the unit of analysis for those data. Student "comfort level assessment" assignments were marked as positive, negative, or a balance of both.

Results

Although students in the class represented a total of six ethnicities, over the course of the semester three of these became three distinct groups: Black, White, and Jewish students. The student from India and the biracial students, although occasionally injecting comments, did not noticeably influence the direction of classroom interaction. Three major themes of student communication emerged regarding Whiteness: accepting the idea of White privilege, determining how to live an antiracist life, and learning how to communicate about race. We discuss these themes individually below, noting communication patterns associated with each.

Dealing with White Privilege: Are We the Same or Are We Different?

The White identity issue that surfaced especially often in class discussion was that of White privilege. The instructor designed several class sessions around this topic, but it was also the overriding theme of the communication initiated by Black students. Their message could be summarized as, "Our experience is different than yours." White student communication frequently expressed an opposing message: "We're all the same."

Sometimes this was discernible in brief exchanges, as on the day that a Black female mentioned that she could not get band-aids that matched her skin color, and a White female responded, "Tell me about it; those clear band-aids don't look good on me either." At other times, the "we're the same" vs. "we're different" dialogue threaded through an entire conversation, as White students struggled with accepting their colleagues' framing of particular situations as racially motivated. In a typical discussion, an African American student observed one day that retailers follow Black shoppers around, implying they are not trustworthy. Several White females disputed this, saying they themselves had worked in retail and had never been told to treat customers differently on the basis of race. Other African Americans added their own stories of being shadowed. White students only dropped their objections when a White female revealed that in her role as floor manager of a retail store, she had been ordered to follow Black customers and train her workers to do the same.

At other times, implications of White privilege arose as White students appealed to Black students for help in understanding their cultural patterns. In the effort to develop mutual understanding, both sides used two major strategies that became staples of their communicative efforts: analogies to other groups or social situations, and personal experiences. An example of this type of exchange occurred in the second week of class regarding "the N word." (Because no audio-taping was done of class conversations, all conversations included in the text are necessarily reconstructed

from field notes. Quotes from focus groups and student papers are reported verbatim):

White Female (WF):	Why can African Americans use the "N word" and other people can't?
Black Female (BF):	It relates to family. It's a matter of ownership. We own that word. Like if you call your sister a "B," it's ok, but if somebody else did it you'd be furious. You using it shows you don't see anything wrong with the word.
WF:	But should African Americans use it though?
BF:	I agree it's ownership. For Whites to say we all shouldn't use it is hypocritical. It's us saying it's our right to say it if we want to.
WF:	We don't have a word like that so it's hard to understand
Jewish Female (JF)[1]:	But Jews don't call each other "dirty Kike." I see a mean word as a mean word.
Black Male (BM):	Why is it a question of fair? I do use it, but not in mixed company. It's like a nickname in my family but I don't want White people to call me that. Certain Black people I don't let call me that. But you have to understand we are a community who will take negative things, adopt it as our own, and go about our business. Like, you look at our foods. Those were scraps from the White people's tables and we turned them into something delicious. It's about accommodation.
WF:	Oh I was just curious.
BF:	Curiosity is good.
JF:	Lots of people are persecuted. Maybe your great grandparents were beaten and killed. Mine were too. Why do you want to hold onto a thing because it's yours, and then you want to be treated equally?
BF:	When someone looks at me the first thing they think is I'm Black. You're Jewish but people can't see that immediately. You look White. White people don't get that . . . but it's like here's your little cage now get in it.
WM:	Well, gay people can use "queer" or "fag" in that community.
WF:	Or like women being called chicks, look at the "Dixie Chicks", they turned it around and wrote powerful songs. (laughter)
WF:	I'm Jewish and we don't use—I can't even say it—but we can joke about a lot of stereotypes that others can't. I was discriminated against; I had pennies thrown at me. I think it's a comfort thing. I didn't joke about being Jewish until I came here and had Jewish friends.

Although in this conversation the explicit mention of White privilege occurred relatively late, the fact that White students seemed to be insisting that Black use of the "N word" should follow the rationale they themselves would use in a similar situation could be taken—and evidently was taken by at least one Black student—to mean that their experiences were categorically equivalent. Nevertheless, a movement toward

understanding is readily recognizable, as White students consider the viewpoint of Black students through analogy (gays' use of the word "queer," and Dixie Chicks lyrics) and personal experience (in this case that of the Jewish students).

Within four or five weeks, various White students began to come to the conclusion that Black experience was indeed very different from their own. Typical of these comments was one White female's observation after viewing a video on politically correct language, "I think as White people we don't have to face it every day so if that sort of thing happens we don't have to think, 'Is it because we're White?'" Focus group and student document data confirmed that acceptance of the idea of White privilege was the aspect of identity that came closest to being resolved for them. As one White female reflected

> I realized that things really do happen. People really do have experiences that I don't have. People don't follow me around in the store because of the color of my skin. People don't throw out my application because of my name. Once I realized that this really does happen I think my perception of race changed completely.

As in Cooks' (2003) study, not every White student in the class had resolved all objections to the idea of White privilege by semester's end. A few students shared that they were still in the midst of processing much of what they had heard: "I got overwhelmed and shocked by this stuff . . . I couldn't really form a lot of opinions at once. I didn't really say anything because I was still. . .. I was being bombarded by a lot of information." At least one student indicated he was not convinced that White privilege was a fact in his life, whereas students in the Jewish focus group considered the emphasis on White privilege to be too narrow:

> "I never heard any acknowledgement that sometimes Black people have power, Black people have privilege, and Black people can be ignorant. That there are multiple power systems always enacted," declared one female. "When we are asked to bring in an excuse for an absence for a holiday then the system is working against us. Black people who are Christians . . . don't have to worry about getting Christmas off, because they already have it off. And they've never thought about that, and that's ignorance just in the way that Whites are ignorant."

Defining a Non-racist Lifestyle: Now That I Know This What Do I Do About It? From the beginning of the semester, White students solicited advice from African Americans on how to be nonracist. An early example of this occurred around the third week, when the instructor told a personal anecdote about being with a group of White graduate school friends when the power flickered. The instructor had said to her friends, "If the electricity goes out you won't be able to see me." One of her White friends responded, "Yeah, if we turn out the lights all we'll see is your teeth and your eyes." The instructor judged that with that remark, her friend had "crossed that line" between what was appropriate and what was not. One White student jumped into the narrative, "But how do you know? I would have been the person to say that." Several Black students tried to analyze the event, eventually concluding tentatively that the rule of thumb she could bear in mind was to avoid confirming any stereotypes, even when joking. The pattern in these interactions was for White students to turn to

Black students for advice, and for their colleagues to offer it, when possible, mixed with a liberal dose of encouragement (as in the "N word" conversation: curiosity is good).

A dilemma for some White students was how to respond to collective guilt. As one female reflected in focus-group conversation: "I all of a sudden felt like omigosh I'm pissing everybody off . . . I mean it was kind of brought to my attention that all of these things are going on but not really like, well ok this is what you should do about it." This observation parallels those of Steele (1995), who concluded after talking with both Black and White students at a variety of college campuses, "Most of the White students I talked with spoke as if under a faint cloud of accusation . . .. Guilt is the essence of White anxiety just as inferiority is the essence of Black anxiety" (pp. 184–185).

The most dramatic discussion of the issue came about three weeks into the semester, when one White student related that over the past summer, she had had a chance to visit a slave castle in Ghana with a racially mixed tour group. She described the sensation of walking into rooms with hooks still in the walls where Africans had been chained for shipment to North America. Both White and Black members of the tour group were crying, but many of the Blacks later told her bitterly that the Whites should not have had anything to do with that moment. The student then asked whether most Black people would have felt that way:

BM: Regardless of your intentions, I'd probably have told you dry your eyes. You can't understand. . . . You might feel guilty, but I'd be wondering if you'd come back and do anything differently.

BF: Joe [note: all names are pseudonyms], I disagree. (turning to the White female) If I was there I'd embrace you because then we could talk about what's going on. I think that's the point at which we could come together . . . . I, like you, cannot know fully what that experience was. I think to say "dry your eyes" separates us even more. I commend you for speaking about that experience.

WF: Joe, I think you think we're saying we understand how you feel. I cry because it's sad. I know I can't understand how you feel by reading a history book. I cry at funerals but I know I don't know how they feel. . . .

JM: In DC there's a holocaust museum where people of all races go in, and come out crying. All we [Jewish people] really want is for people to recognize it happened. I don't say go dry your eyes. . . .

WF: I think . . . . basically to try to understand shows you are open-minded.

BM: I'm asking is she crying because she's legitimate with her crying or is this for show. . . .

WM: I totally understand Joe's reaction. Part of it is personality but part of it is the emotion of the time.

WF: I can see where that anger would come from but it hurts me because racism will never end if when we're trying to learn . . . . (trails off)

This conversation contained many of the elements we had begun to expect—the use of analogy, personal narratives (several have been omitted to save space), White request for advice on how to be sensitive, White apology/Black acceptance, Black assertion of difference—but this was the first time that opinions on an issue were

broadly distributed across racial lines. Two strong Black personalities in the class took opposite approaches, and some White students indicated that they could understand both positions. Unfortunately, the openness that characterized this particular conversation was not always present, especially on the part of White students, as will be discussed below.

Aside from how to act in specific situations and dealing with White guilt, the other action point raised by White students was how to identify themselves ethnically. A White male threw this dilemma out to the class one day:

> From the video and class discussion, White people never think about being White. I agree, and I also wonder if it's because we're conditioned to stay away from indicating our identification with the White race. If you said, "I'm proud I'm White" people would say, "Where's your klan hat?"

A Black student responded that he had no problem with someone being proud to be White but insisted that White students should go further and identify with their original ethnicity. White students objected that they were not connected with their ethnic heritage, that their ancestors had changed their names at Ellis Island, and so on.

This interaction did not produce any conclusion and was recalled by a student in one of the White non-Jewish focus groups with dissatisfaction. "I grew up with a very strong felt identity. I knew who I was. Then I came into class and I felt like I couldn't identify myself as White because I had to be a European nationality." Another wrote in her class paper, "This country is all I know. I am not denying my heritage. I should not be criticized for not knowing it." The impression of the researcher at the time of the conversation was that students were unwilling to fully engage the issue, perhaps because no one felt she/he fully understood the implications of it. Analogy with Black student experience was not helpful in this case, and students were unable to discover any alternative tools that would enable them to reach a consensus or a sense of resolution.

After wrestling with these issues for 15 weeks, many students still had questions about what to do with their new-found knowledge. The comments of one White male in a focus group summarize their frustration:

> If people say White people are causing problems by not recognizing that racism is existing in subtle forms and all these things that are going wrong, well what would your solution be? What would you like to see happening?... I mean the readings and some of the models had these generic little vague statements of "become one with the racial community," but that didn't mean anything. If there was an easy solution we would have done it a long time ago probably. But I think it can be frustrating and can instill sort of a sense of helplessness in White people if there is nothing that we know we need to be working toward.

Becoming Comfortable Communicating about Race: If I'm Honest will People be Offended? Not only did White students have to come to grips with the question of their privilege and decide how to respond to that knowledge on several fronts, but at a more fundamental level they had to discover how to communicate about race in

the classroom. The one-page comfort-level assessment in the second week of class explicitly raised this issue. White students were roughly evenly split between describing themselves as comfortable, not comfortable, and mixed/ambivalent (10, 15, and 11, respectively) in their feelings regarding talking about race. Of the 14 students of color, nine fell into the "comfortable" category, and five were mixed/ambivalent. No students of color indicated that they were uncomfortable discussing race. The results of this exercise were a harbinger of conversational patterns to come.

Little metacommunication about White student comfort levels occurred within classroom interactions. In their papers, many students evaluated the overall class climate positively. Although some admitted that they had initially felt constrained in their comments, most indicated that with the building of classroom community, respect, and trust, they began to feel the freedom to be open about their opinions and experiences. Within the focus groups, too, especially at the beginning of the allotted hour, a few White students spoke positively about the tone of the class. Specific keys to the creation of a positive classroom community that were mentioned included the presentation of community guidelines (Orbe & Harris, 2001) at the beginning of the term, the patience of class members with those among them who were naïve regarding racial issues, the use of humor to diffuse tension, and the assignment of a group project that enabled small, diverse groups of students to work together toward a common goal.

Regrettably, however, a stronger theme within the focus groups regarding classroom communication—and one that was also present in many student papers—was that White students, although perhaps appreciative of the overall polite tone of the class, nevertheless felt that as members of the dominant group it was difficult to discuss issues of race without being considered racist. They believed that the only people whose viewpoints on race were considered legitimate were those from historically oppressed groups. A Jewish female observed of her own group's position in the class,

> I noticed that it seemed like we had to justify ourselves into a minority to feel like we could be heard. That until then anything we had to say would be taken as, "oh but you're White." And we had to be like wait, wait, wait, can I prove that I'm a minority so that you won't brush my feelings aside and say, "You won't understand."

Most non-Jewish White students concurred, although unlike the Jewish students they did not feel that their viewpoint had been accepted as valid by the end of the course. "I feel like as a White person you were always looked at as the oppressor," a White male noted. "So you have to tiptoe around certain subjects. You can't be quite as forward or quite as honest or direct." A female student agreed, "Who has the right to say what and feel what was something that I thought was an undertone throughout the semester." "Everybody is terrified of being told they are racist," a White male asserted. "That is the last thing you want to hear when you're trying to understand. And a lot of times that was the stock answer—you wouldn't understand."

White students in the class took three communicative approaches to what they perceived as their lack of a right to contribute to racial dialogue: (1) providing evidence of personal nonracist lifestyle, (2) qualification of race-related opinions or questions, and (3) silence. The first approach occurred most frequently at the beginning of the term, when many White students arrived eager to learn but seemingly fearful they would be seen as guilty until proven innocent. A common response to this anticipated discomfort was to try to establish credibility for themselves as nonracist Whites. This was conveyed through narratives about racist actions and attitudes they had seen in family or friends, with the clear explanation that they disapproved, or by indicating that they had many people of color among their friends. Typical of these was the description by a White female of how she "grew up on base" and did not distinguish between races. "I couldn't understand why my hair wouldn't go up in braids and beads like all my little friends until I was 10 or 11." During discussions of this type, although other White students might add their own stories, students of color usually remained silent. Members of two of the focus groups commented on this pattern: "At the beginning of the semester I noticed that a lot of the White students seemed to [feel] like they had to prove somehow that they, oh you know they were like, 'I have four and a half Black friends'," one male Jewish student joked. Similarly a female White student remarked, "A lot of White students who did talk, when they were talking they were trying to prove that they can relate or that they've had some epiphany." Judging from the reactions of both Black and White students, this "establish anti-racist credibility" approach was distinctly unsuccessful.

Whereas the attempt to establish antiracist credibility occurred mainly at the beginning of the course, the use of disclaimers prior to expressing opinions or asking controversial questions was a consistent feature of the class. During the focus groups, one female student explained her own strategy,

> I prefaced my questions with, "I don't know if this is what you're talking about and I'm kind of ignorant in this," but you know then ask my question. So that if I was wrong or I was saying something offensive or I was totally off base then I'm admitting that I'm ignorant and I don't know what I'm talking about and I want to know.

When this happened, Black students almost invariably responded in an encouraging, supportive manner. As no White students made negative comments about the response this technique generated, it seems to have been assessed as effective.

The third approach—simply choosing not to talk—was observed by researchers during class interactions over the entire semester, although interpreting the meaning of a given silence was obviously difficult. In a large class, after all, it is not unusual for a minority of the students to carry most of the conversational burden. What struck us as noteworthy was not so much the balance of talk, as what was *not* said. In the second week of class, for example, the agreement of the U.S. Supreme Court to hear the University of Michigan discrimination case was raised by the instructor as a topic for discussion. Although an upper-level class at a university with a notably conservative student body might have been expected to launch into lively debate

on this topic, none was forthcoming. Self-censorship appeared to occur again about a week later after the class watched a video, "The Color of Fear", in which a group of people of color attempts to convince a well-intentioned but naïve White man of his privileged racial status. When asked to respond to the content of the video, most White students were quick to denounce the man as an embarrassment. The substance of his opinions, which are not uncommonly expressed among White Americans, was not addressed at all.

In focus groups and student papers, White students confirmed their use of a "silence strategy." Some explicitly stated that their silence sprang from the attempt to be racially sensitive: "I just sat back and listened because in my mind I was thinking I would have said something and probably would have stepped on somebody's toes. I just didn't want anybody to get upset." "Because I was not raised in a very racially diverse community, during class discussions I was more eager to listen than to contribute to the discussion because I was worried about offending my classmates." One female even regretted probable negative implications for persons of color in the class. "I feel like the African American students had a lot to share of their experiences," she said. "We learned a lot from their experiences, but I don't think they took anything away from our experiences . . . because we were always pulling back."

A larger number, however, indicated they were silent because they were afraid of the social consequences if they spoke:

> I think there were some pretty opinionated individuals . . . when they made a comment or when they spoke, that was it and like it left it to where no one would want to challenge what they said because either they're going to get some kind of reaction or it's gonna get into an argument or something.

"I felt that I kind of withdrew a little bit because . . . I shared experiences myself but I never felt it was validated." "When some people would speak . . . others in the class that would be like, omigosh I can't believe she just said that. Which made me not want to talk ever. Yeah, they would make faces." Some students became downright defensive, as in this assessment by a male student: "You know that you're on the losing team. Every day you come to class and fight the battle all over again and you're not ever going to be on the winning team."

Members of one focus group summarized White student silence this way:

> WM: Our experiences make us look negative. And their experiences. . .
> WF: . . . Make us look negative (laughter)
> WM: Right. And I think that's basically what we're getting at. We don't get to talk because it makes us look bad.

Implications for Pedagogy

Findings of this study both confirm and challenge aspects of both stage model and critical approaches to understanding the development of White student racial identity in multicultural classrooms. On the one hand, the inductively derived categories of dealing with privilege and defining a nonracist lifestyle are exactly the

overarching themes that Helms (1990, 1995) cited as crucial to White identity development. Within the classroom, concern about how Whites can discuss race-related issues emerged as a distinct third theme. However, it might be argued that outside of the intensity of an instructional environment devoted specifically to exploration of racial issues, questions of how to talk about race might easily be conceptualized as falling under the category of establishing a positive nonracist identity.

On the other hand, our research in this specific classroom provided little evidence of an orderly progression of stages in developing an identity. White students appeared to struggle with all three major identity issues simultaneously, from the beginning of the semester, with multiple trajectories in evidence for each. Attitudes akin to *reintegration* were in evidence, but seemed to arise out of a frustration at not being given guidance toward antiracist identity rather than a precursor to seeking it. In fact, the lack of specificity in the second half of the model regarding qualities of a positive White identity—such as healthy responses to White guilt and determining one's ethnic heritage—rendered that component essentially meaningless.

One of the most striking features of this particular class was the coalescing of the Jewish students into a third racial group (see also Weber, 2004). And although the presence of the Jewish students as a contingent at once White yet non-White was unusual, at least at this university, it raises broader questions about typically dichotomous notions of race in U.S. college classrooms and reinforces the criticism that Helms' model is unduly limited in referring only to Black–White identity issues. The presence of the Jewish students as non-Black minority persons created a dynamic in which Black students periodically shifted educational roles, from instructing White students on Black cultural patterns and racism to joining White students in seeking education themselves. At times, the Jewish students in this class became a bridge between the two groups, boundary spanners with one foot in a world of privilege and one in a world where pennies could be thrown at them and they could be kept in detention as a group day after day in middle school. Discussions of power and privilege became multifaceted when their Jewish identity came to the fore.

Many of the findings in this investigation are aligned with the tenets of a critical approach. As evidenced in Cooks' (2003) work and similar investigations, the rendering of the invisibility of whiteness as visible was a crucial and at times excruciating task for White students. However, like all social identities, White racial identity is multifaceted (Giroux, 1997; Tatum, 1994). Privilege was only one of three major themes that emerged in White student communication regarding their own racial identity struggles. Those who made no progress in addressing other racial identity-related issues like how to deal with guilt, where to locate their ethnicity, and how to become comfortable communicating about race appeared at the risk of stagnating in their development.

This raises a challenge to the precept that evoking discomfort through multicultural pedagogy is in and of itself a good thing. Racial dissonance may be a necessary, but by no means sufficient, precursor of positive change. Discomfort may prod the individual toward honest self-examination and growth, or harden him/her

into resistance. In line with Gaertner and Dovidio's (1986) concept of aversive racism, the dissonance between newly recognized negative attitudes toward minority groups and students' preexisting nonprejudiced self-image may produce anxiety and lead students to avoid interracial contact more than ever. Although students themselves undoubtedly bear a great deal of responsibility for their reaction to discomfort, it is possible that some explanation for reintegration and resistance may be found in the classroom environment itself. Instructors of courses with substantial units on whiteness may need to be careful to address multiple aspects of White racial identity development, not only the issue of White privilege.

More specifically, understanding by the instructor of White student silence may be critical. Although findings by Cooks (2003) and others (Ahlquist, 1992; Ladson-Billings, 1996) locate student silence primarily in passive resistance, most White student silence in this class did not seem to be so motivated by passive resistance. Rather, according to the accounts of the White participants, a reverse of the power relationship present in society at large seemed to be operating at times in this class. It appeared that White students saw themselves as being in a low-power position, and monitored their conversation accordingly. In fact, White students displayed some of the communication behaviors that in other situations might be expected from members of nondominant groups. Whereas it has been suggested that members of cocultures who are of an assimilationist orientation are likely to use such communication techniques as remaining silent in the face of offensive comments from the dominant group, being overly polite to dominant group members, and averting communication away from controversial subjects (Orbe, 1998), in this class these patterns were most evident in White student communication. White students may have been attempting to "assimilate" to the "dominant culture" of the classroom itself, because they were fearful of the social consequences if they did not. In contrast, Black students displayed many more tactics associated with a strong positive racial identity, such as authentically communicating their own opinions.

What we are describing, then, is a peculiar twist to the invisibility of whiteness in U.S. society: at the same time White students are placed in a dominant position by virtue of their race, they feel they cannot honestly discuss racially charged issues without fear of the ultimate societal shame—being labeled as racist. It has sometimes been assumed in multicultural pedagogy that within a democratically structured class, when White students are the most numerous group they are likely to dominate class discussions (DeTurk, 2001). In our observation, at least in a multicultural classroom where there was a large enough number of Black students to constitute a visible group and where the instructor was also Black, the reverse was much more likely.

We suggest that the communicative practices that are indispensable in building a structure of mutual understanding about White privilege—practices that are primarily student-driven such as students of color acting as educators and White students analyzing through the use of analogy, question, and personal experience—may not be sufficient for the resolution of the additional White identity tasks of developing positive antiracist actions and learning to communicate about race. In

order to address these dilemmas, the instructor may have to be more than a "fellow traveler," but instead purposefully create a space for White student discourse by actively ensuring that a wide range perspectives —both conservative and critical— are thoroughly and openly dealt with. In a discussion on the Supreme Court ruling on use of race as a criterion for college admissions, for instance, instructors may need to play devil's advocate if necessary and raise questions of fairness and reverse discrimination if students themselves do not do so. They may need to suggest specific actions, develop role plays, make assignments that enable White students to apply their newfound awareness in daily life (instructors may find Bishop's, 2002, *Becoming an Ally* a useful resource). Tatum (1994) has suggested that readings may be assigned or speakers invited to class to provide models of positive White identity. Finally, instructors may need to push students beyond a Black and White view of race to considering the complexities of Black–Asian American, Jewish–White, and other nondichotomous racial categories.

For White students to withhold their expressions of disagreement and experiences in an instructional context is not productive, either for themselves or for students of color. Rather, it is important for them to bring their thoughts and opinions to the table, so that negotiation of understanding can take place, and the interracial communication classroom can become a place where, as Kincheloe and Steinberg (1998) urge, Whites can create "a positive, proud, attractive, antiracist White identity that is empowered to travel in and out of various racial/ethnic circles with confidence and empathy" (p. 12).

Note

[1] Students who identified themselves as Jewish, by their own description, had a foot in both the dominant and the oppressed perspectives. Therefore, in citing their comments from class discussion, they are identified as "White female/male" when they seem to take the White perspective and "Jewish female/male" when they speak from their Jewish identity. This decision was made in part because in the first few weeks of the semester before they emerged as a separate group, the researcher taking field notes was not even aware of their Jewish identity. As they chose to constitute a separate Jewish-identified focus group, comments lifted from those data are naturally labeled as being from the Jewish perspective.

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