2006

Suppressing Cultural Sensitivity: The Role of Whiteness in Instructors' Course Content and Pedagogical Practices

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"Diversity is not a choice, but our responses to it certainly are. And to date, all indications point to the fact that our responses have not been adequate to deal with the full range of issues presented by the complexity of teaching in a multicultural nation" (Howard, 1999, p. 2).

From a legal standpoint, equal and equitable access to academic opportunities exists for all students. However, research indicates that disparities continue to persist when comparing the experiences of students of color with their white counterparts in institutions of higher education (Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996; Gallien, 2005; Giroux, 2003; hooks, 1994; Howard, 1999; Patton, 2004; Vargas, 2003). In spite of literature that argues cultural sensitivity must be part of academic spaces (Gallien, 2005; hooks, 1994), studies continue to reveal that white students are more likely to learn about the history, culture, and traditions of their worlds whereas students of color are often expected to assimilate to structures that

preserve whiteness as the academic, organizational, cultural experience (Feagin et al., 1996; Gallien, 2005; hooks, 1994; Patton, 2004; Treinen, 2004; Vargas, 2003; Warren, 2003). Wander, Martin, and Nakayama (1999) argue that the academy is emblematic of other aspects of social life. They state that:

> Evidence of the reproduction of whiteness is seen in the history of law, in the extension and denial of credit, in the quality of health care and life expectancy, in the quality of education, and in job opportunities that, in the United States, continue to favor whites over nonwhites. (p. 20)

Social and ideological norms privilege white experiences. In education, these norms sanction the marginalization of people of color in the subject matter of courses (Feagin et al., 1996; Gallien, 2005; Howard, 1999; Warren, 2003) and in textbooks that inform course content (Hanson, 1999; Treinen, 2004). For example, from an analysis of basic communication textbooks, Hanson (1999) found that "few role models for students who are African American, Asian American, Hispanic or Native American" existed (p. 15).

Like course content, pedagogical practices often emerge from instructors' cultural experiences that privilege white students. Students of color frequently experience underattention from faculty but at times they experience overattention as teachers seek them out as representative speakers for their race (Feagin et al., 1996; Gallien, 2005). Many students of color report feeling emotionally isolated and invisible when studying on predominantly white campuses (Feagin et al., 1996; Gallien, 2005; Vargas, 2003). In part, this stems from communication climates where students of color experi-

ence discrimination through racist language and jokes, mistreatment by faculty and police, and covert ritualized messages that create campuses as white cultural spaces (Feagin et al., 1996; Gallien, 2005; Howard, 1999; Hikes, 2005; Vargas, 2003). Hikes (2005) further argues that the "lack of culturally enriching activities for underrepresented students contributes to a negative campus climate" (p. 23). Yet "taking pride in one's culture is central to achieving cultural diversity" (Hikes, 2005, p. 23). Unfortunately, as hooks (1994) argues, "white supremacy" is maintained on many college campuses through pedagogical practices, course content, and knowledge claims.

Our educational history and present indicates that studies must explore cultural sensitivity in higher education to promote equity and equality among the increasingly diverse students the academy serves. Although the term cultural sensitivity may evoke notions of accommodation or tolerance, it is conceptualized here to attempt to capture the transformative dimension of critical whiteness studies. In this study, cultural sensitivity is defined as the integration of diverse perspectives into pedagogical practices and course content so that cultural particularity and diverse standpoints are valued knowledge constructs. In addition, cultural sensitivity is the recognition that knowledge claims and perceived "truths" be contextualized so that dominant ideologies that maintain whiteness and white privilege are not positioned as normative. Cultural sensitivity challenges racial hierarchies and racism. This is particularly important to study because as Giroux (2003) points out "representations of race and difference are everywhere in American society, and yet racism as both

a symbol and condition of American life is either ignored or relegated to an utterly privatized discourse" (p. 193).

Like Giroux (2003), Howard (1999) argues that educators "have not gone far enough" in examining the complex meanings associated with racial differences in education (p. 3). Yet, students of color comprise approximately one third of the students in higher education – a figure that has almost doubled since 1976 (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). The U.S. Department of Education (2002) reports that approximately 86% of full time faculty are white whereas approximately 14% are people of color. Even though there is relative racial homogeneity in faculty populations and student populations are increasingly diverse, faculty are often not encouraged to study cross cultural pedagogical perspectives (Gallien, 2005; Vargas, 2003). However, "studies indicate an increase in academic achievement of students when instruction is modified and congruent with the cultures and communication styles of culturally diverse students" (Peterson, 2005, p. 69). Unfortunately, teachers may be unaware of the cultural messages they express in their pedagogy and course content. For example, Feagin et al. (1996) argue that "the strong symbolism attached to white spaces on predominately white campuses becomes part of the personalities and identities of the individuals associated with those spaces" (p. 16). This is not to say that teachers are racist; rather it is to say that racism exists in educational systems that teachers represent.

Educational environments are central sites of the creation and perpetuation of ideology (Patton, 2004; Shome, 1999) and thus can reproduce and/or challenge dominant ideologies that maintain racism. Whiteness is

a dominant ideology that maintains racism (Dyer, 1997; Giroux, 1997; Warren, 2003). Studying the cultural meanings in whiteness may give insight into promoting culturally sensitive academic spaces (Cooks, 2003; Shome, 1999; Treinen, 2004; Warren, 2003). For example, Wander et al. (1999) argue that "using the construct of whiteness allows a discussion where no one is a racist and permits an exploration of ways in which some people happily if unwittingly benefit from and informally reproduce patterns established by racism" (p. 15). Communication educators have been found to be pivotal forces in transforming educational experiences informed by whiteness as their central goal is to promote communication competence (Cooks, 2003; Treinen, 2004). Yet, Howard (1999) argues "seldom have we helped White educators look deeply and critically at the necessary changes and growth we ourselves must achieve if we are to work effectively with the real issues of diversity" (p. 3).

This research responds to these important issues by examining whether and how communication educators enacted cultural sensitivity in their pedagogical practices and course content for basic communication courses. Because basic communication courses are required at many colleges and universities, I found these courses as important sites to explore cultural sensitivity. First, I describe critical whiteness studies, which provides the theoretical background for this research. Next, I describe how I gathered and analyzed my data. Finally, I discuss three themes that illustrate the significance of whiteness on basic course instructors' cultural sensitivity.

WHITENESS: MARKING POWER AND PRIVILEGE

Critical pedagogues make race a central subject of analysis in educational settings through methodologically defining, describing, and critiquing racism (Giroux, 1997, 2003; Vargas, 2003). Scholars view race as socially and culturally constructed through communication where people of color are subordinate to individuals who are racially white (Dyer, 1988; Giroux, 1997; Vargas, 2003). At the heart of whiteness studies is the examination of "the familiar in the name of racial justice and a more inclusive social truth" (Vargas, 2003, p. 6). Whiteness scholars maintain that "the familiar" has become part of the dominant ideology in American culture, which allows whiteness to elude definition and as a consequence escape responsibility for participating in racism.

Challenging the notion that those who are white have no race is central to whiteness theorists (Cooks, 2003; Dyer, 1997; Nakayama & Krizek, 1995; Shome, 1999; Warren, 2003). In Nakayama and Krizek's (1995) groundbreaking essay, they argue:

> White is a relatively uncharted territory that has remained invisible as it continues to influence the identity of those both within and without its domain. It affects the everyday fabric of our lives but resists, sometimes violently, any extensive characterization that would allow for the mapping of its contours. (p. 291)

All too often individuals who are white are "given cultural permission not to hear voices of people of other races" (McIntosh, 1997, p. 295). Yet whiteness theorists have worked to decenter the privilege, power, and

dominance that exists when whiteness is perpetuated as a universal way of knowing (McIntosh, 1997; Nakayama & Krizek, 1995; Shome, 1999). As Wander et al. (1999) argue: "By interrogating the largely hidden ideology of white supremacy, the ways it continues to perpetuate a social order dominated by whites can be challenged" (p. 23).

Whiteness scholars shatter the myth of whites being pure, angelic, and unmarked. In fact, they describe how whiteness perpetuates systemic racism. Systemic racism resides "in invisible systems conferring unsought dominance on certain groups" (McIntosh, 1997, p. 298). For example, Dyer (1988) writes:

> In the realm of categories, black is always marked as a colour (as the term coloured egregiously acknowledges), and is always particularizing; whereas white is not anything really, not an identity, not a particularizing quality, because it is everything – white is no colour because it is all colours. This property of whiteness, to be everything and nothing, is the source of its representational power. (p. 45)

Like Dyer (1988), Shome (1999) argues that, "whiteness constructs itself as the 'normal' body by locating difference always in the body of the 'other'" (p. 119). Othering represents the process whereby the normalizing of the white self takes place and others are compared to that "standard." Hence, the term diversity from a "white" perspective often invokes examining people of color rather than themselves as part of the same cultural fabric.

Warren (2001) observes that whiteness is typically studied from material/physical, discursive/rhetorical, and performative perspectives. The material/physical

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perspective explores how "white bodies interact with others" (Warren, 2001, p. 185). The raced body is the central site of analysis. Individuals who are white are often unaware of the "invisible package of unearned assets" that define their cultural experience (McIntosh, 1997, p. 291). Others move away from the physical body as the central site for exploring whiteness and argue that "discourse produces whiteness through social interaction" (Warren, 2001, p. 186). Shome (1996) argues that vocabularies must be devised for understanding how whiteness maintains dominance – whiteness is constituted in the discursive space of American culture. Finally, Warren (2001) argues that performativity captures aspects of both perspectives through a complex understanding of how individuals perform racial identities with their physical selves and bodies as well as their discursive practices.

Nakayama and Krizek (1995) call communication scholars to incorporate whiteness studies "into their analyses and claims" (p. 305). Like Nakayama and Krizek (1995), Shome (1996) and Howard (1999) argue that studies of whiteness are particularly timely and salient given the inevitability of our multicultural future. Shome (1996) states that scholars must "examine how whiteness, confronted by the forces of multiculturalism, might be recentering, reasserting, and resecuring its power and privilege through various aspects of public life." Nakayama and Krizek (1995) further argue that to study the construction of whiteness we must "focus on the institutions that discursively produce and secure the power of whites" (p. 503). Cooks (2003) too argues that "pedagogies that speak to whiteness . . . are much needed in communication education" (p. 246). It is only

when we understand the systemic implications and problematics of whiteness that we can begin to create a discourse for change.

This research responds to these calls by examining communication teachers as representatives of academic institutions. To date, communication educators have primarily analyzed whiteness from undergraduate or graduate students' perspectives (Cooks, 2003; Nakayama & Krizek, 1995; Patton, 2004; Treinen, 2004; Warren, 2001, 2003) and autoethnographically showing how reflexivity marks whiteness (Patton, 2004; Warren, 2003). These important works have described perspectives on how whiteness maintains its power in the academy. However, few works have examined how whiteness influences communication teachers' cultural sensitivity. This essay contributes to work on whiteness and communication education by examining the impact of whiteness on how basic course teachers' position knowledge and understand cultural sensitivity.

METHOD

The goal of this project was to analyze how basic course teachers enacted cultural sensitivity in their course content and pedagogical practices. In addition, I was interested in exploring how whiteness impacted basic course teachers' perspectives of cultural sensitivity.

Study Participants

The participants for this study were recruited from institutions located in midwestern communities. I re-

cruited 15 participants from seven educational institu-
tions (five private and two public) offering communica-
tion majors. All 15 of the study participants identified
themselves as white. Four on my participants were
women and 11 were men. I recruited teachers at the
rank of assistant professor or higher who instructed ba-
sic communication courses such as interpersonal com-
munication, public speaking, and/or the hybrid course.
Most of these basic courses were designed to meet gen-
eral education requirements.

The five private institutions ranged in size from
1,000 students to 4,000 students. Three out of the five
private institutions had a Christian affiliation. The
demographic composition of these institutions was fairly
homogenous with a predominantly white, middle class,
traditional college-aged student body. The two public
institutions each had approximately 20,000 students.
These institutions were more heterogeneous than the
private institutions; their students were more diverse in
age, race, and class. However, over 74% of the students
at both were white.

Data Collection

To study cultural sensitivity in basic communication
courses, I employed in-depth interviews. This method
was selected for its effectiveness in gathering data on
how teachers situate cultural issues and sensitivity in
their course content and pedagogical practices.

The interviews that I conducted were audio-taped
and transcribed for analysis. The in-depth interviews
followed an interview schedule with approximately 20
questions most of which were open-ended. The ordering

of questions varied from interview to interview to pre-
serve the naturalness of conversation. Questions in the
interviews ranged from the general (e.g. What is your
teaching philosophy?; What type of classroom climate do
you try to develop?) to the specific (e.g. How do you de-
cide what topics to select for your basic course?; To what
extent, do you feel it is important to incorporate cultural
issues and diversity into your basic course?). Each in-
terview lasted approximately one to two hours. The in-
terviews yielded 251 pages of transcripts.

Data Analysis

My data collection and analysis procedures reflect
the "constant comparative method" (Lindlof, 1995). Two
important aspects of this method are that "it specifies
the means by which theory grounded in the relation-
ships among data emerges through the management of
coding" and "it shows explicitly how to code and concep-
tualize as field data keep flowing in" (Lindlof, 1995, p.
222-223).

Shortly after my interviews began, I documented
similar themes that emerged among participants. Once
my data collection phase was complete, I reviewed in-
terview transcripts for general material on communica-
tion education, diversity, culture, ethnicity, race, and
whiteness. In addition, consistent themes emerged with
respect to the following: course content, pedagogical
practices, teaching philosophies, time constraints, com-
munication climates, language choices, and overall ex-
periences in American classrooms. To emerge as a
theme in my analysis, it had to arise in at least five in-
terviews. As noted by Fetterman (1989), reliability is

shown through studying patterns of talk and/or behavior and "looking for patterns is a form of analysis" (p. 92).

Through this method of coding data, I was able to examine how communication teachers conceptualized cultural sensitivity in their basic courses. Yet I also acknowledge the partiality and subjectivity associated with the meanings I constructed as my white, heterosexual, female identity influenced my understandings of these themes.

CONSTRUCTING CULTURE: WHITENESS AS EMBEDDED KNOWING

I began with the assumption that all of my participants were embedded knowers. Smith (1994) argues that people (knowers) are embedded in ideological frameworks and all they see and perceive is filtered through and altered by these frameworks. Thayer-Bacon (2003) asserts:

> Due to our embeddedness we inherit a past at birth, and are affected by our environment, including our social environment. The social practices that surround us promote us to believe certain beliefs and not others. How people begin to make sense of the world is due to their contextuality, including their own subjective experiences as well as their social setting, and its past. (p. 8)

Educational environments are powerful social settings for knowledge construction. Knowledge construction is a contextual and relational process (Thayer-Bacon, 2003). Instructors are contextual and relational agents that

influence the knowledge students experience. Therefore, how and what teachers "know" about cultural sensitivity can impact what and how students "know" cultural sensitivity.

How my participants "knew" was apparent in how they talked about cultural and diversity issues. All of my participants identified themselves as white and most characterized themselves and their white students as "cultureless" and/or "raceless." My participants' whiteness was manifest in their self-labels as well as how they described "culture," "diversity," and "race." Consistent with the arguments made by whiteness scholars, "white" was situated as normative, invisible, and empty (Cooks, 2003; Dyer, 1997; Giroux, 2003; Shome, 1999; Warren, 2003). My participants did not see culture and diversity as central topics in their basic communication courses. The embedded nature of whiteness in my participants' knowing was evidenced in their descriptions of their course content and pedagogical practices. Their voices, which are identified through pseudonyms, articulate how whiteness influenced their basic communication courses.

The communication teachers I studied situated and viewed culture as being either absent and/or at the margins of their basic courses. My participants also described their enactments of cultural sensitivity in conflictual ways that minimized the extent to which they engaged in cultural sensitivity. These three thematic perspectives illustrate the challenges basic course instructors face when fostering culturally sensitive spaces in the midst of "whiteness."

Culture and Absence

Basic course teachers defined cultural issues, cultural sensitivity, and/or diversity issues in terms of race or the physical body. Because there were generally no non-white bodies, instructors often spoke as if their classrooms and institutions were devoid of culture and diversity. The perceived lack of race, culture, and/or diversity translated into a way of excluding this material from their course content. Cultural and diversity issues were not represented as central themes in the content or pedagogical practices of teachers who instructed basic courses. If fact, often times they were absent all together. David clarifies this point as he stated:

> I mean there are no blacks, no minorities so when we talk about something it really makes it difficult to draw on experiences if people don't have any experiences in diverse situations. When I think about diversity I usually think about either ethnicity or cultural experiences.

Don stated, "I probably have a lot in common with our students because we don't have a lot of racial diversity here. I have no foreign students in any of my classes this term. I've had in the past, blacks, and Asians and Middle Eastern students and not a one this term." When I asked Katherine would it be fair to say that she has not explored cultural issues she noted, "They aren't here — there is a very small minority population."

The physical presence of whiteness in my participants' basic course classrooms influenced how they viewed the terms culture and diversity. Culture and diversity were marked – color is a mark of difference that

differentiates it from the white body (Shome, 1999). Because it was perceived that color was generally not evident, cultural and diversity issues were not salient to white teachers or their predominately white student body. Culture was represented as the "other" and the absence of "others" equated with an absence of examining culture. This was one justification for cultural and diversity issues being absent from basic communication classes.

When asked, faculty did acknowledge that exploring the intersections of communication and culture were important issues; however, they noted that they were beyond the scope of basic communication courses, which was the second reason for culture and diversity issues being absent. Sue stated, "I think in a basic course there probably isn't enough time because you're just touching on certain areas. That's one reason why I've tried to narrow it down into certain content areas. But no, diversity is not a big area that I zeroed in on." Like Sue, David felt cultural and diversity issues were important but beyond basic communication courses. He saw these issues emerging in upper division courses such as intercultural communication. Therefore in his basic course David stated, "I don't make a point of diversity in any respect. Unless it pertains to the issue at hand. I don't make it – it's not a big issue with me." Like David and Sue, Will felt that cultural issues were beyond his basic communication courses. He stated:

> Yes we've got to be aware of the different cultures that you may be addressing . . . but I don't think it's the responsibility of that basic course to say alright if you have this culture, these are the differences you're

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going to face. You can't do everything in the basic course.

Gina stated that cultural issues rarely emerged in her basic communication class. Her reasoning was as follows, "although I don't talk about it, I don't want to make an issue of it so it appears to be an issue." Gina felt this logic was most culturally sensitive for her predominately white basic course classroom. Like my other participants, Sal stated that culture and diversity were "not an overriding discussion that crops up" in his basic course. Finally, Will like most of my research participants noted that personal experiences were central to pedagogical approaches in basic communication courses. However, Will stated, "I guess I don't consciously think of diversity in drawing examples but would simply draw from my background." This comment was similar to most of my research participants as diversity, culture, and race were equated with being culturally othered.

Cultural issues were not topics associated with basic communication courses. Rather, instructors felt there were standard competencies students needed to achieve. For public speaking, this meant composing, researching, and delivering speeches. For interpersonal communication, this meant studying the self, perception, nonverbal communication, language, listening, emotions, relationships, communication climates, and conflict. The hybrid course represented a combination of these topics with an emphasis placed on speaking. Instructors spent a significant amount of time reviewing these topic areas and responses were fairly consistent across instructors.

Most teachers cited their text as being central to how they structured their course. Teachers also perceived that their texts did not explore cultural issues in

great detail, a finding supported in research (Hanson, 1999; Treinen, 2004), and they chose not to depart from the course text. Therefore, culture and diversity issues were absent from basic communication courses because of a "raceless" student population and because these issues were beyond the scope of basic course materials.

As my participants described the absence of culture, they were describing the absence of perceived difference in their classrooms and campuses. Their knowing was bounded by whiteness and their on-campus experience. Ultimately, this knowing led my participants to see "culture" as absent from their lives and the lives of their students. This is not to say that cultural issues never emerged in their basic courses. However, when they did surface, they appeared positioned at the margins of standard course topics.

Culture and the Marginal

Because whiteness was normative and unmarked, cultural issues were marginalized in the course content and pedagogical perspectives of basic course instructors. When cultural issues were addressed, instructors generally described they emerged in two ways: (a) through students and/or (b) through a token figure or event.

Many of my participants said that cultural and diversity issues surfaced from time to time through the inquires and choices made by students. For example, Sue stated:

> Diversity — the students deal mostly with this. We have a couple of case studies where they are doing role-plays . . . they get to choose what case study they

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would like to deal with and there are a couple that deal with prejudice.

Like Sue, Mary stated that cultural issues emerged in her course through students' and their speech topics. Mary stated:

> I see diversity issues coming up in terms of topics. For example . . . if I have Asian students, many times they'll pick a topic that is one of their culture. So all of a sudden the class now is experiencing hearing about something they know nothing about so now it's a cultural difference . . . you get this diversity snapshot.

Sue and Mary's comments illustrate how cultural issues received passive treatment. As basic course teachers, they were not promoting the role of culture as a communication phenomenon but only dealt with it as recipients of cultural information. Like Sue and Mary, Larry also felt that cultural issues emerged in his course through students. Larry stated:

> I think they come in automatically because you are going to have diversity issues that are raised by the students . . . Let's discuss diet okay. And some of these students have not experienced what we're talking about as foods from another culture. . . and definitely it hasn't immersed you in this other culture but at least it's giving you some idea.

Mary and Larry's comments highlight the marginal role of culture in their classrooms.

Basic course teachers prepared core course content; however, they were less likely to prepare course content on cultural diversity as these topics were situated as outside core course concepts. If these issues did not emerge through basic course students, then the topics

often did not emerge. Locating the importance of cultural and diversity issues within students' lives is an important step in working towards cultural sensitivity. However, the passive approach basic course teachers took seemed to marginalize culture in two ways. First, by marking difference as color, students of color were often responsible for addressing cultural issues. Second, cultural issues became only partially legitimized because students rather than faculty were the sole sources of culturally centered discussions. Cultural and diversity issues were generally not an area of inquiry for the faculty and student body as a whole. My participants' whiteness functioned to legitimize the extent to which my participants needed to "know" about culture and hence enact cultural sensitivity. Such an approach absolves basic course teachers from having to "know" culture and ultimately may impair their ability to be culturally sensitive.

Another way that course content and pedagogical practices were positioned at the margins was through tokenism. Tokenism represented how one figure/concept was used as the defining element for how an instructor framed a topic. Tokenism frequently emerged when I asked questions on cultural diversity.

The pervasive use of Martin Luther King as the "representative black," persuasive speaker, was the most frequent example used by my participants to illustrate that they were culturally sensitive and that these issues emerged from time to time in their courses. For example, Don stated, "When it comes to certainly the black issue in talking about language . . . I still think of the imagery of Martin Luther King's 'I have a dream.'" Bill noted that Martin Luther King was important to his

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basic class. He stated, "I made a big deal yesterday when I was talking about persuasion when using MLK's speech as an example so I think I do it but I don't do it with a sledge hammer." Don and Bill believed that their inclusion of MLK represented their cultural sensitivity – performed in such a way that was sensitive to a predominantly white student population. Bill's whiteness was evident in his defensive framing of culture and diversity as he noted that he does not explore such concepts with a "sledge hammer."

The oratory skills of Martin Luther King were cited in a number of interviews. Although the oratory prowess of MLK is important to include in instructors' course content, it was the way that MLK was manifested as a representative "cultural" figure that remains a point of analysis in this study. MLK was positioned as "other" to the normative white male speakers (i.e. Bill Clinton, Ronald Reagan, Abraham Lincoln) that dominated the discursive space of my interviews. Vincent captured the tensions of how whiteness is embedded in standard claims about speaking prowess. He stated:

> . . . what you're trying to do is teach a way of talking that works within certain kinds of professional contexts in our society and that's always a problem whenever you're dealing with cultural diversity and I don't know how quite exactly to manage that except I always looked at it provisionally to talk about expectations here are not universal – they are what is expected in certain contexts in our society that most of you expect to work in.

Vincent was reflective on the presentation of his course content but still privileged "whiteness" as normative within his basic communication course. Yet, Vincent

also spoke about his usage of MLK to discuss oratorical traditions that deviated from these ideological norms. Hence, the course content highlighting MLK became an opportunity to discuss non-normative communicative practices. When I asked Don if he felt that cultural issues were tokenized in his class he stated, "of course, even in our own discipline textbooks." Vincent and Don were not unreflective of their choices and experienced dialectical tensions with the ideological norms in their classrooms.

Tokenism was also present when examining instructors' communications with students of color. For example, Don stated in reference to his teaching method:

> When I've had the foreign student or the black student – I try to work them right into the discussion. They are one of the examples. They are one of the illustrations. But if I sense they're reluctant, then I back off because then I'm going to be counterproductive.

Vincent too spoke of the dialectical tensions associated with drawing on students at the margins to help the class learn about course concepts. He stated, "I never know quite when I'm overdoing it or relying too much on one person to sort of bring that margin in. It seems like any way forward in terms of representing the margin is imperfect." Once again, students of color were cast into the role of "other" and as the individuals who and/or could discuss culture and diversity.

The positioning of culture and diversity at the margins occurred through viewing these topics as incidental to standard course topics. First, the marginalization of culture occurred through shifting the responsibility of including these topic areas to students – particularly

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students of color. This situated students of color as the only knowers of culture and diversity –reinforcing the invisible power of whiteness. Second, culture and diversity issues were included in basic communication courses through token representations as illustrated by their positioning of culture at the margins of basic classes. Many of my participants were unreflective about their cultural embeddedness as knowers. Those who were reflective still supported the dominant ideology although they experienced dialectical tensions with doing so. This may impact teachers' and students' ability to practice cultural sensitivity.

Culture and Conflict

Most basic course teachers did not explore the complexities associated with sense making from cultural perspectives. Although participants acknowledged that such issues were important, they often offered reservations about "going too far" when examining cultural particularity. My participants rated themselves moderate to high in terms of their cultural sensitivity. However, when teachers discussed their moderate to high levels of cultural sensitivity, many made arguments that contradicted their status as culturally sensitive teachers. By not "going too far" with cultural issues, my participants' illustrated how whiteness functioned to maintain its dominance. Knowledge in basic communication courses was situated as white. The voices of several research participants illustrate this point.

When asked if he was culturally sensitive to his students, Bill responded "yes." He stated:

> Yes, but . . . I think we have to be on guard to make
> sure that people are not insensitive slobs. I don't be-
> lieve that we all need to be on a crusade twenty-four
> hours a day to right all of societies' ills . . . the point in
> our class is to get them to feel comfortable talking in
> front of other people not change their sociological be-
> havior. . . sometimes it's easy to lose sight of that . . .
> But no I think I — I always promote being sensitive.

Bill's response illustrated how he construed himself to
be sensitive; however, Bill's sensitivity was undermined
by his insistence that teachers not go too far. By arguing
that the role of teachers is to "not change sociological
behavior" in a basic course designed to improve stu-
dents' communication competence, students may be left
with the hegemonic assumption that audience analysis
and speeches equate to white ideological norms. Ben
shared some of Bill's sentiments and stated in reference
to cultural issues:

> One of the big challenges is how can I do that in a way
> that fosters growth – that fosters the understanding
> that we are not separate from each other and in a way
> doesn't raise that shield of defensiveness that I'm get-
> ting kicked on by these elders who created all this
> crazy stuff in the first place.

Because of these challenges, Ben felt he taught basic
courses in ways where "standard topics" were covered.
When I asked Ben to describe the challenges associated
with incorporating cultural issues in his basic courses
he stated, "It takes work. Part of it is that it takes addi-
tional cognitive resources that you don't have to expand
to get perfectly acceptable courses." From a critical
pedagogical perspective, critiquing "perfectly accept-
able" basic courses may mark how course content and

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pedagogical   perspectives   maintain   systemic   racial
privileges.

Like Bill and Ben, Tom noted that diversity issues
were important. However, he experienced tensions with
integrating these concepts into his courses. He stated:

> I think it's very important. I think it's something that
> should be done. Diversity is a buzzword. I'm becoming
> concerned again that at times we're overdoing it. I
> mean when . . . the entire textbook is oriented only
> towards diversity . . . That's not all there is to being a
> good communicator is being able to adapt to a diverse
> audience.

Tom went on to discuss additional tensions he experi-
enced with the inclusion of diversity issues in his basic
course content. Tom stated:

> If we make all of communication diversity and . . . we
> forget the whole rhetorical tradition . . . that this field
> was before 15 years ago – African American studies is
> going to say excuse me but that's our area . . . and
> there's going to be nothing left of communication.

Thus Tom too expressed concern about incorporating
cultural issues into basic communication courses. In
fact, he situated cultural and diversity issues as sepa-
rate from the basic communication course and the field.
Tom's "embedded knowing" privileged Western history
and tradition and he unknowingly used whiteness as a
framework for how he conceptualized his basic course
content. Like Bill and Ben, Tom did not experience a ra-
cial identity and marked color, culture, diversity, and
race as other. Each illustrated that their hierarchy of
knowing placed whiteness at the top, center of their

courses and the field of communication – a position emblematic of the academic structure.

When the subject of race was discussed, I could sense discomfort in my participants' talk. The further students' racial identity was from the teacher's whiteness, the greater the likelihood that teachers would mark the difference. When race entered into my participants' thinking, they explored some of their challenges in interacting with students of color. Examples of this were most salient when my participants spoke about their interactions with international students.

In response to a series of questions about comfort levels with students, Sue stated "where I have the most discomfort come to think of it is because I'm struggling with it is with international students who are struggling with English . . . I haven't had a lot of experience dealing with international students and we don't have that many." Will shared Sue's experiences and noted, "The area I really have a problem with is international students . . . sometimes it is extremely difficult to understand them." Bill also shared the perspectives of Sue and Will. He stated:

> That's never bothered me because I was never raised that way and I love the international students . . . The biggest problem . . . is sometimes they tend to think that the rules should be different . . . it's the old adage of being able to speak the correct King's English . . . if you are going to work in this country you're going to give a public presentation. If we can't understand your words, then it's not effective.

Like race being structured as a mark of difference, accent was also marked as a tangible difference. Again, basic course students were expected to adapt to their

predominantly white classrooms as academic structures seemed to offer my participants no other options.

In describing culture and conflict, I have identified the tensions in many of my participants' responses – participants who truly wanted to engage in cultural sensitivity. Yet, as Shor (1996) states, "No knowledge or teaching can be neutral because all emerge from some ideological position in society and all influence the development of students in one direction or another" (p. 56). Individuals have been inculcated with ideological assumptions that whiteness is the norm against which all things are measured. Such was the case for my participants in the context of their basic communication classes.

THE ROLE OF WHITENESS IN BASIC COMMUNICATION COURSES

Teachers' viewpoints are integral to their construction of knowledge (Smith, 1994; Thayer-Bacon, 2003). Through my thematic analysis, I described how teachers positioned cultural issues as absent, marginal, and/or conflictual. Whiteness influenced my research participants' definitions of and views on culture and diversity and I argue that whiteness functioned implicitly as the reason behind not exploring and/or marginalizing these topics. My participants' responses indicated, "the experiences and communication patterns of whites are taken as the norm from which others are marked" (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995, p. 293). Whiteness was so natural that many of my participants did not question its relationship to their course content and pedagogical practices.

Whiteness

In fact, the meaning of whiteness never really emerged as a topic area when I asked my participants questions about culture and diversity. Indeed, whiteness was explicitly absent from my data and yet implicitly pervasive in my data.

Many white teachers who taught predominantly white students identified themselves and their students as raceless thus discussing cultural issues seemed to lack relevance. My questions on culture were often moot points in my participants' academic and discursive spaces. However, culture was taught. This point is supported in Treinen's (2004) claim that "when culture is explored in our basic communication course classrooms it is often the 'other' that is studied" (p. 148) – the other is positioned as cultured while the norm remains cultureless or "white" (Shome, 1999; Treinen, 2004). My participants' responses were consistent with these findings – culture and diversity were located outside of my participants' and their students' white identities. These attitudes may perpetuate beliefs that obscure cultural particularity and normalize white privilege and dominance. The consequence of this is summarized by Treinen (2004), "Treating all students as though they are the 'same' does not benefit them – it only allows an instructor to further distance her/himself and her/his students from the system of racism" (p. 157). Racism is perpetuated when individuals cannot see the structures that influence how they know.

Cultural issues were marginalized in the talk of my research participants. Many basic course teachers suggested that the inclusion of one or two individuals or content areas related to culture and diversity provided adequate coverage of these issues. For example, Martin

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Luther King was commonly cited as evidence teachers included cultural issues in their basic courses. Additionally, students of color and international students were often marked as "others" in predominantly white classrooms.

What I found most important to problematize about my participants' responses was their meanings of cultural sensitivity. Instructors framed culture and diversity by normalizing whiteness in their course content and pedagogical practices. Cultural "sensitivity" was practiced by marking "others" or not discussing them at all. From physical bodies and voices that were marked as different, to discourse practices that stated cultural issues need not go too far within communication, instructors expressed conflicting ideas regarding the integration of cultural issues in their courses and pedagogies. Like Warren (2003) found with students, these conflicting concerns have everything to do with the implicit ways that whiteness functions to inform my participants' knowledge. Whiteness is a "racial identity" that is "taught, learned, experienced, and identified in certain forms of knowledge, values, and privileges" (Giroux, 1997, p. 296). Indeed, when we impose "the King's English" or when we say, "diversity isn't here," we are revealing our cultural embeddedness as white knowers.

Yet cultural embeddedness is systemic — my participants' responses emerged from a social system and structure that perpetuates racism. This system is widely experienced. For example, even though my participants were recruited from diverse institutions, there were a number of similarities in their perspectives. Instructors' course content and pedagogical practices were products

of ideologies that underlie organizational expectations such as institutional curriculum requirements, existing course descriptions, and the contents of textbooks available to the faculty.

Not understanding the ideology of whiteness and the cultural particularities that emerge from such frameworks impairs teachers' ability to enact cultural sensitivity. We perpetuate whiteness when we cannot see it and the knowledge structures that maintain its invisibility. When whiteness is perpetuated in predominantly white classrooms, people of color are cast as deviating from the white norm. Students/people of color are othered in interactions and discourse. Shome (1999) shares her perspective as a person of color in a predominately white classroom. She described the "thing in their look" she received from white students and teachers — a look that marked her voice and body as "different." Shome (1999) argued that these looks were meant to maintain "racial lines" and reinforce ideas such as "us/them, subject/object, and superior/inferior" (p. 124). However, marking whiteness in the classroom grants communication teachers with opportunities to enact cultural sensitivity and challenge racialized hierarchies of knowing.

Treinen (2004) argues that "through a naming and marking of the white center of power, space can be made for the voices of those oppressed by systematic racism" (p. 141). This process starts when educators recognize their own whiteness and the embedded and relational nature of knowing. Giroux (1997) states that "teachers should address those histories that have shaped the normative space, practices, and diverse relationships that white students have inherited through a legacy of

racial privilege" so that students and teachers can strive for "racial justice in the present" (p. 309). Teachers must acknowledge the complex ways that race functions to create power relationships in classrooms. This is particularly true of instructors teaching basic communication courses as these courses provide valuable sites that can interrogate how racism is socially constructed and the central role of communication in perpetuating and/or challenging these processes. One participant's struggle to engage in such interrogation is Vincent who spoke about the significance of situating knowledge claims. Vincent stated:

> I think it's always important to point out the particular origin and the particular groups about which paradigms are often talked about or presumed to be the case – what they presume to be the universal and so that's one dimension to the cultural particularity of any paradigm and to start asking questions about how might this look in a different context.

Giroux (1997) argues that, "the new ethnicity defines racial identities as multiple, porous, complex and shifting and, in doing so, creates a theoretical opening for educators and students to move beyond framing whiteness as either good or bad, racially innocent, or intractably racist" (p. 312). Rather, whiteness can be framed as a part of our classrooms that must be marked so that our knowing can be inclusive of cultural sensitivity.

In short, overcoming whiteness requires scholars to reflect on themselves and how they experience their own racial places. From these locations, scholars can begin to expose the system that curtailed their vision and knowing.

CONCLUSION

Research indicates that in spite of the plethora of research on the importance of incorporating cultural issues into teachers' course content and pedagogical practices, students of color continue to experience marginalization and oppression in their academic pursuits (Feagin et al., 1996; Gallien, 2005; Howard, 1999; Patton, 2004; Vargas, 2003). Treinen (2004) argues that "simply adding the voices and perspectives of cultures other than white culture will not alleviate the inequities that minorities experience in the classroom" (p. 157). Students and teachers must see "how their whiteness functions as a racial identity" so they can critique "whiteness structured in dominance" (Giroux, 1997, p. 312). Like previous studies that described whiteness as an ideology among students (Cooks, 2003; Nakayama & Krizek, 1995; Patton, 2004; Treinen, 2004; Warren, 2001, 2003), this study found whiteness as central to how culture and diversity were understood by teachers. By exposing white hegemony in course content and pedagogical choices, greater opportunities for producing culturally sensitive environments may be fostered.

Given the widespread requirement of basic communication courses on college and university campuses, the examination of instructors' course content and pedagogical practices from whiteness perspectives is particularly salient to enacting cultural sensitivity. Cultural sensitivity provides all students with more equal and equitable educational experiences. Perhaps, we can find inspiration from the dialectical tensions Vincent embraced in his pedagogy. He stated, "it's easy for peo-

ple who have certain privilege to become despairing about the possibility of changing it but I see myself as trying . . . to challenge that despair and insist on the loveliness of struggle."

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