

Resisting Racist Discourses with Research Methods, Active Learning, and Storytelling

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Abstract

This article contributes to building anti-racist teaching resources in the scholarship of teaching and learning in sociology. We developed an active learning-based project in which students conduct and analyze an interview with someone they are close to on how their family discussed racial discourses during their childhoods. Using Latinx Critical Race Theory as a framework and through qualitative analyses of student assignments, we found that the course project developed students' critical consciousness by helping them evaluate how biographies are shaped by race, racism, and racial discourses and identify how racism and resistance manifest in family life through storytelling.

Keywords

critical pedagogy, color-blind racism, course project, race and ethnicity, high-impact learning

A department review in the sociology department at California State University-Fresno (Fresno State) found that students wanted more practice with research methods outside methods courses. We therefore developed an active learning project in which students practice research methods and apply sociological concepts to understand and challenge social inequalities. The project consists of assignments that help students build interview skills and analyze racist discourses. Students conducted an interview with someone they are close to on how their family discussed race and other social inequalities. They then completed assignments based on their interviews. The assignments develop students' critical consciousness by helping them evaluate how biographies are shaped by race, racism, and racial discourses and identify how oppression and resistance manifest in family life through storytelling.

We are two Latina sociologists who teach at Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) with a majority of Latinx, first-generation college students,^{1,2} University of California, Merced (UC Merced) and Fresno State. The project was implemented in two upper-division sociology courses at these institutions, in the same region with similar student demographics. With only 2 percent of courses at HSIs focusing on racial/ethnic experiences (Cole

2011), we specifically designed our project for students of color at HSIs, guided by Latinx Critical Race Theory (LatCrit), to build upon existing efforts to develop anti-racist teaching resources in the scholarship of teaching and learning in sociology. Our project contributes to wider disciplinary goals of helping students apply course concepts and methods to examine social inequalities and develop their sociological imaginations by connecting their own and their participants' biographies to the social structure. We found that students gained critical consciousness, a fundamental tool for resisting racist discourses.

BACKGROUND

Challenging the idea that sociologists should avoid activist approaches, we take a scholar-activist approach to teaching sociology by preparing

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students to not just understand social inequalities but also develop tools to challenge them using research methods, sociological concepts, and counter-storytelling. Critical race theorists argue that research agendas, methods, and pedagogical approaches should aim to alleviate social inequalities (Delgado and Stefancic 2001). As curricula and pedagogy can maintain oppression (Garcia 2018; hooks 2009), we intentionally take a liberatory pedagogical approach to promote social justice through challenging racist discourses.

We take a LatCrit (Delgado and Stefancic 2001; Yosso and Solórzano 2005) approach to pedagogy and active learning to help students develop skills to resist racist discourses. Hegemonic ideologies, such as colorblind racism, can be opposed using storytelling and counter-storytelling (Solórzano and Yosso 2002). Minoritized groups can use storytelling and counter-storytelling to resist the ideologies and institutions of dominant groups (Delgado and Stefancic 2001). In the classroom, Jennifer Friedman and Laurel Graham (2018) found that storytelling developed deep learning about race. Lee Anne Bell (2003) also describes the importance of storytelling for interrogating ideas about race and racism, finding that students are less defensive and more thoughtful when discussing race and racism when analyzing stories versus reading texts.

Active learning techniques help students show less support for color-blind ideologies and increase support for structural understandings of inequality (Bailey et al. 2015). We used interviews and critical self-reflection methods to develop critical thinking skills, self-knowledge, and metacognition about research methods and racial ideologies and discourses. Kendra Jason and Sarah Nell Epplen (2016) argue that students sometimes take worldviews for granted and do not consider how they may be socially constructed. They used reflections to develop students' self-knowledge regarding how racism and their personal lives interconnect and to confront their own White privilege (Jason and Epplen 2016).

The content for this project focuses on theories of color-blind racism, the dominant racial ideology that avoids acknowledgment of race and racism (Bonilla-Silva [2006] 2015). Jennifer C. Mueller (2013) identified a need for critical approaches to teaching millennials who have absorbed color-blind racist ideologies, including that of a "post-racial" society. Rather than avoiding racial discussions, students directly asked questions about race and racism, incorporated their own and their participants' biographies into their learning about color-blind racism, and developed their

writing, oral, and analytic skills in identifying and critiquing racist discourses. Learning how to name and discuss racism in anti-racist ways is a form of direct action against racist discourses that students developed through the project. The project supports the development of critical consciousness in students, a concept developed by Paulo Freire ([1970] 2005) that refers to individuals developing awareness of structural oppression and gaining motivation to work toward social justice.

ASSIGNMENTS

We developed assessments for a high-impact learning experience incorporating theories of race and racism, sociological methods, shared reflections, storytelling and counter-storytelling, and, importantly, students' own biographies. These assignments guided students toward two primary learning goals: (1) recognizing how biographies are shaped by race, racism, and racial discourses to connect critical pedagogy with theories of race and racism and (2) identifying how racism and resistance manifest in family life through storytelling.

For theoretical support, we assigned a chapter from Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's ([2006] 2015) book *Racism without racists* on the four central frames of color-blind discourses and reviewed it in class. Even though most students were sociology majors who had already taken Research Methods, we also provided students with a refresher on how to conduct an interview. The reading and assignments were scaffolded throughout the semester. The reading, lessons on color-blind racism and conducting interviews, their interview, and first discussion board assignment occurred throughout the first quarter of the semester. The second discussion board was due midway through the semester. The final paper and presentation were due at the end of the semester.

The Interview

Students refined qualitative methods skills by interviewing a close family member or friend regarding their racial and ethnic biography, experiences with racism and discrimination, and how their families talked about and dealt with race and racism. Interview questions included the following (the complete assignment details are available on Teaching Resources and Innovations Library for Sociology [TRAILS]; Dueñas and Crowell 2022):

- What have you learned about racism from your family?

- Did your family ever try to instill certain expectations in you due to your race or gender?
- Did you ever talk to your family members about any discrimination you experienced? How did they respond?

Discussion and Reflection

Again, drawing on LatCrit, we supported storytelling, counter-storytelling, and self-reflection (Delgado and Stefancic 2001; Jason and Epplen 2016; Yosso and Solórzano 2005) through discussion boards focusing on the interview process and content, and students' own experiences with racial discourses. The first discussion focused on the interview and prompted students to reflect on their interviewees' family conversations about race and racism, how their relationship with the interviewee affected the interview, and how they could refine their interview techniques. The second discussion focused on the interview content and self-reflection and prompted students to compare their own experiences with those of their interviewees.

Final Report and Workshop

The final assignments consisted of the report and a workshop presentation in which students reported their experiences, findings, and reflections on how their lives, relationships, and perspectives on race and racism were shaped by racial discourses. For the report, students addressed the following questions, drawing from their interview data and course content:

- Which racial discourses did you find to be most prevalent in your data?
- How did those racial discourses interact with and shape understandings of racial and other types of inequality?
- What are the dominant ideologies that frame our understanding of racial and other inequalities?
- How are our views and perceptions of inequality affected by the type of discourses that we are exposed to and participate in?

RESULTS

The majority of students interviewed close friends or significant others; some interviewed their parents, while a small number interviewed a sibling or a close cousin. There was no discernible pattern

between the characteristics of the students and who they chose to interview. The discussion boards showed that students primarily reacted to their relationship with the interviewee in board posts and in responses to classmates' posts. Students recognized the discomfort in talking openly about race and racism within their most intimate relationships. Many also acknowledged the resilience and strength of their loved ones who developed coping strategies against discrimination. The boards permitted self-reflection, prompting them to investigate their own memories of experiences with social identities, race, and racism and draw comparisons with their interviewee. They most often recollected racist exclusion, sharing experiences of discrimination and racist remarks. They also reflected on discourses of resilience in the face of racism, particularly students who interviewed immigrant parents.

Students' reports demonstrated that they learned theory and methods and developed critical consciousness of racism and counter-storytelling to resist racist discourses. Karina,³ who identifies as a Latina woman, explained generally how she came to understand storytelling and counter-storytelling as a way to disrupt racist discourses: "Racism will always be an issue, but the way you talk about it is the first step in eradicating it. We have to watch the way we make up excuses for racism and other inequalities." Tara, a Black woman, described more specifically how talking openly about racism can undo certain color-blind racist discourses:

If you are immersed in a space where inequalities and injustices are talked about as if they can't be fixed or as if they're not that big of a deal, then . . . you're not going . . . to think about effective solutions to these issues, who these issues impact, and how they impact those individuals.

Both students demonstrate counter-storytelling as a way to resist color-blind racist discourses.

The assignment showed that having intentional conversations about racism with somebody close to them sometimes resulted in their interviewee sharing experiences with racism in ways they had never done before, allowing students to connect their knowledge about racial discourses to personal experiences. Gabriel, a Latino man, said, "I was able to distinguish between types of racial discourses that have influenced my interviewee . . . throughout the discussion . . . I could see emergent themes . . . part of what had shaped the way this individual thought about race [and] other

concepts.” Furthermore, students demonstrated content knowledge by correctly identifying and categorizing color-blind racist discourses from their interviews and personal stories. For example, Jennifer, a White woman, shared,

... through my own experiences growing up ... when blunt racism was addressed directly people shift into minimization of racism and try to pass it off as a joke, as if jokes make it better and you’re the odd one for pointing it out.

Jennifer now recognizes these discourses as a form of color-blind racism, where racist jokes are minimized to dismiss the real harm that they perpetrate.

Another success came when some students found that the interview and post-reflection turned into storytelling, a way to build “a bridge between individual experience and systemic social patterns” (Bell 2003:4). One student, a Latina woman named Gaby, drew on a story from her childhood to identify racist discourses that affected her ability to confront and cope with racist experiences. Referring to a racist experience at school, she said,

I would come home and tell my mom but she didn’t know how to address the issue because she didn’t want to cause any commotion and have me start any problems in school so I would have to just deal with it.

Another student, a Latino man named Michael, learned a story from his mother about her experience with a labor and delivery nurse when she gave birth to him, who made assumptions about her ethnicity and financial status. He wrote, “When hearing my mom’s story I thought this specific racial discourse of cultural racism, as this was definitely the nurse buying into belief that Mexican Americans are poor and have medical [Medi-Cal, California’s Medicaid program].” Michael’s reflection demonstrates counter-storytelling, where he reinterprets his mother’s experience as a form of cultural racism.

These conversations raised critical consciousness and resistance to racist ideologies that enforce a narrative biologizing social disadvantages as natural or deserved and therefore to be borne silently. Some students expressed a commitment to naming racism and speaking openly about it to address root causes and unmask racism. After interviewing her mother, Gaby reflected on how she is changing the pattern with her own daughter:

I have made sure to talk to my seven-year-old daughter about what racism is. Because of my experience as a kid, I try to ask her every day how her day at school went and if she was bullied or if any of the kids were being racist toward her.

Rather than avoiding racial discussions, which would uphold color-blind racism, Gaby made discussing race and racism with her daughter an everyday priority. The development of critical consciousness thus prepared some students to go further in resisting racist discourses than their families did.

The presentations highlighted how racist discourses and forms of resistance vary according to social factors such as race, immigration status, skin color, gender, and class. They also allowed students to express deeper emotion as they retold stories and reflected on their conversations with loved ones, encouraging other students to empathize, connect, and feel the human impact of racist discourses. The critical reflection components helped most students connect conceptual aspects of racial discourses and racism to the experiences of their interviewees and their own experiences and examine those connections through a sociological lens.

DISCUSSION

Revisiting our two primary learning goals, we found that this project helped students name the racist discourses that shape our biographies and identify racism and resistance in family life. Both outcomes nurtured students’ critical consciousness, a fundamental step toward more actively resisting racism in everyday life. This project demonstrated the value of critical self-reflection, storytelling, and active learning approaches by integrating sociological theory and methods within a LatCrit framework. While there were many positive educational outcomes, we must also reflect on how this project can be expanded to address the complexity of oppression. We identified two areas where students struggled and updated the course project materials (available on TRAILS; Dueñas and Crowell 2022) to further support student learning.

Students responded emotionally in written reflections and during the workshop presentations, often because the interviews had revealed the pain they and their loved ones had been living with. Critical race scholars have found that discussing racism and other forms of oppression can help those who are affected to find their voice, heal, connect, and re-empower themselves (Delgado and

Stefancic 2001; Yosso and Solórzano 2005). We added more support during our lessons and discussions of the assignments for this course project on how to process emotions during the research process. We encourage instructors to create a supportive, academic community where complex feelings that occur while conducting research can be unpacked. Encourage students to practice self-care, reach out to supportive people in their lives, and use mental and physical health resources to help them process emotions.

We also observed that several Latinx students did not challenge the anti-Black sentiments that participants shared. Challenging anti-Black racism is critical for promoting racial justice and reducing racist harm in the classroom. To prepare for this situation moving forward, we updated the course project with specific statements that ask students to critique anti-Black and other forms of oppressive discourse that their participants may state in their papers and presentations. The framework proposed by Ann E. Lopez and Gaëtane Jean-Marie (2021) for challenging anti-Black racism in the classroom is a useful reference for instructors who want more support. In the assignment instructions and during class, remind students to challenge any discriminatory statements their participant made in their assignments so that the class can continue to be a comfortable learning environment for all students. Our goal for this project and our courses is for students to be prepared through readings, discussions, and reflections to critically examine and challenge racism, including anti-Black racism, in their own lives and prevent racist harm.

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NOTES

1. <https://admissions.ucmerced.edu/explore/our-students>.
2. <https://tableau.fresnostate.edu/views/Enrollment/RaceEthnicityDetail>
3. All participant names are pseudonyms.

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