

## **Diversity and the United States: Issues of the Other in Teacher Preparation**

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In 1985 the American public education system awoke to a new reality. The occasion was a short article by demographer H. L. Hodgkinson (1985). The article, *All One System* forecasted the changing face of the school age population in the United States. His observation that the school age population would become increasingly diverse has proven to be true, and the extent of that diversity has continued to grow. For example in 1982 whites comprised close to 73% of the school age population. By the year 2020 that percentage is expected to be less than 54%. Whereas in 1982 the largest minority group was the African-Americans, by 2020 the largest minority group will be of hispanic origin (Pallas, et al., 1989).

The impact of these anticipated changes can be felt in the political as well as the educational environment in the United States. Politically the “browning of America” has spurred an increase in a sense of a loss of entitlement among white males. This sense of loss has resulted to both the dismantling of affirmative action, and the closing off of the southern borders of the United States. If we are to be able to create a society in which increased diversity and a sense of loss can be reconciled, then we need to be able to build an inclusive society where our differences and commonalities are respected and accepted. While there are broad public policy implications regarding race and diversity, we would like to step back from these to provide a framework for understanding how increased racial and cultural diversity impacts building an inclusive society. Specifically this article will examine the way in which the socio-psychological aspects of cultural and racial identity affect our ability to construct powerful learning environments that can efficaciously support the learning of all children. In this article, when we talk about diversity we are not merely describing a situation in which there are people of different races or cultures, but more importantly we include a recognition of the power and resource imbalance that different groups have within a society. These imbalances can be caused by racism as well as other forms of repression. Accordingly, while the examples in this article refer to the United States we believe that the general framework provides insight into any society that is faced with the issues of educating an increasingly diverse population.

In examining the issues of culture and diversity we mostly confine our discussion to African-Americans and whites. While we draw on literature related to other groups and their lives in academia our decision to focus on African-Americans reflects both the state of the literature and the primacy of black/white relations in understanding racial politics in the U.S.<sup>{1}</sup> Throughout this article we will refer to race, culture, and ethnicity as interchangeable

concepts. While the social construction of race is substantially different than that of culture it is our position that the delineation of these concepts is not gravely necessary within the context of African-American and white ethnic American relations. Accordingly, we define culture as the commonly held experiences of a particular group of people that inform and shape the social and privately held values, forms of expression, and ways of knowing that bond the members of a community. Alba (1990) argues that central to an ethnic group is a sense of common history that sets it apart from others. Drawing on Omi and Winant's (1986) notion on the relationship of race, class, and gender to the prominent spheres of social conflict in this country and Ogbu's (1979,1981, 1985 & 1986) concept of fictive kinship, race, ethnicity, class, and gender are subsumed in this definition of culture. Thus, while we will speak of African-Americans and whites we by no means subscribe to a singular African-American culture nor do we deny the importance of white ethnic differences. However, we do adhere to Omi and Winant's proposition that these differences notwithstanding, race is a primary consideration in understanding group unity and disunity in America.

This article examines one aspect of the education and diversity issue that is seldom explored, i.e., the teaching of issues of race, culture and diversity in pre-dominantly white teacher preparation institutions. While the diversity of the public school student body is steadily increasing, the vast majority of those preparing to be educators are white. This means that in the foreseeable future the vast majority of students of color will continue to be primarily educated by non minority teachers. Accordingly, it is important that we understand how issues of race, culture and diversity are manifested within the educational experience of aspiring teachers. This article offers a theoretical basis for understanding the complexity inherent in discussions about race and culture within classrooms with limited racial diversity. The lack of significant diversity presents two particular problems for academia - one, how to teach about diversity and cross-cultural issues in an environment in which student-teachers and/or faculty do not have to confront diversity as part of their everyday social interactions on campus, and two, as part of their intellectual pursuits. It is this latter point that this article will focus on.

### **The Denial of Culture**

In the fall of 1990, one of the authors of this paper was discussing his experience as minority faculty teaching at a pre-dominantly white (albeit catholic) institution with another minority faculty colleague. At the heart of this conversation was a common discovery about the nature of the students at this particular institution, that is, they did not see themselves as cultural beings. In one exercise in class in which students had to write about the role of culture in their lives most of the students defined themselves as acultural. Pressed on the issue some of the students would say their heritage was Irish, or Scottish, or Welsh, but that they always

thought of describing themselves as American. Asked to articulate the cultural aspects of being American they drew a blank. “Being American is not to be tied to culture,” was one response.

This casual observation of two minority faculty members at a predominantly white institution is not atypical. Research on ethnic and racial identity has pointed to the loose coupling of generation expansion and cultural identity among whites. As Richard Alba (1990) points out in his study of ethnic identity in America – “It is hard to avoid the conclusion that ethnic experience is shallow for a great majority of whites and, in the critical domain of culture, being eroded by the churning of large-scale demographic forces” (p. 299).

Other researchers concerned with ethnic identity<sup>{2}</sup> have also noted the sometimes fragile nature of ethnic identity among 3rd and 4th generation European whites. Indeed as Hill’s (1980) study demonstrates ethnic identity among adolescents gives way to individualism and the search for self identity. Referring to essays written by students from different ethnic backgrounds Hill makes it clear that “if there is one recurrent theme in most of these statements it is the theme of individuality and freedom of choice” (p. 215). Even the specter of religion does little to build ethnic identity among white students.

What these studies suggest is that among white students ethnic identity is at best a referent but not an essential component of self identity. At the root of this denial of ethnicity and culture is a firm belief in individualism and self-reliance. It is our thesis that the denial of cultural identity by white students impairs their ability to both understand and legitimate culture among others.

### **Culture and the Other**

*Je est un autre.* (I am an other.) So begins Todorov’s (1984) explication of the Other – that which is outside of myself and to which I am not a part. The history of conquest and of confrontation is replete with the ability to deny the I in the Other. Through this denial of the I, the Other is declared less than I. The Other becomes “outsiders whose language and customs I do not understand, so foreign that in extreme instances I am reluctant to admit they belong to the same species as my own” (Todorov, p. 3).

Throughout the educational experience of white America, this abstraction of the Other is reinforced through the constant presentation of the Other in symbolic cultural terms. The notion of symbolic representation of culture is borrowed from Gans’s (1979) explication of symbolic ethnicity which he describes as an “ethnicity of the last resort,” and where ethnicity is turned into an “occasionally practical avocation” (Alba, 1990, p. 29). According to Alba

(1990) symbolic ethnicity “represents a personalization of ethnicity and frequently amounts to little more than a token acknowledgement of ethnic background” (p. 30). Ethnicity, like culture, is reduced to those characteristics that are acceptable in a multicultural environment.

Like symbolic ethnicity, symbolic culture is the presentation of the Other in acceptable terms. It is this leveling of differences or flattening of culture that informs most of the current efforts by universities and other educational institutions to address the demographic changes in America by expanding “multicultural” education. While there are various approaches to “Multicultural education (Banks, J. A. 1981; Sleeter C. E. & Grant C. A., 1990; Spener, D., 1990) each approach is embedded in a fundamental belief that cultural knowledge of the Other is the key to eliminating differences that might exist between the Other and Whites. For the multiculturalist “reform in race relations depend[s] almost exclusively on the reversal of values, attitudes, and the human nature of social actors understood as ‘individuals’” (McCarthy, p. 56). Nevertheless, while multiculturalism seeks identification with and understanding of the Other through the presentation of symbolic cultural characteristics of the Other, tied to that quest is the hope that inevitably the concept of the Other will give way to the birth of the individual.

The affection for the symbolic cultural definition of the Other to borrow Todorov's phrasing is not from the anthropologist's position but “from that of the tourist whose curiosity about strange ways takes him [or her] to Bali or Bahia, but who confines the experience of the heterogenous within the space of his paid vacation” (Todorov, 1984, p. 251). The cultural presentation of the Other is reduced to those collective acts which easily separate them from the I without threatening the I's conception of the world. One need only contrast the cultural representation of blacks on television versus that presented by black filmmakers for a graphic example of the way the culture of the Other is minimized and reduced to symbolic gestures. The American Television shows *The Cosbys* and *Fresh Prince of Bellaire* provide caricatures of the black american experience, while films like *Boys in the hood* and documentaries like *Eyes on the PRize* demonstrate the complexity of the black american experience. (It is interesting to note that all though the hispanic population is the fastest growing population in the Untied States there is not one hispanic leader character in an television series.)

The presentation of the Other in symbolic terms has a profound effect on the audience's interpretation of the Other and of culture. Among white college students this presentation is often viewed through a variety of personal filters. Four of these filters are of particular relevance to this article. First, the presentation of the Other in cultural terms (symbolic) implies that the fundamental difference between the Other and the I is the associative relationship of the Other, that is, the Other is part of a group that is somehow different from the I's. Second, juxtaposed with this presentation of the Other is the acultural self

identification of white students. Third, identity formation among non-culturally aligned young adults tends to be associated more with separation from family, and sexual and interpersonal identity (Catre & Helms, 1987). The struggle of the young white adult is more focused on interpersonal issues while for blacks identity is strongly allied with collateral social relations. If in their own efforts to make meaning of their place in the world white students are (for the most part) attuned to the highly personal we should not be surprised that their interpretation of the Other and their solution to problems encountered by the Other would start with the individual. Fourth, there is a strong belief that assimilation is a desirable and important part of survival in the U.S. In the education of the white student these four filters conspire to relegate the symbolic culture and the behavior of the Other to the realm of social proclivities that are easily abandoned and of no real value<sup>{3}</sup>.

For most white students culture is viewed as an external issue – it is something other people (mostly but not exclusively defined in terms of race) have or possess. In short, many white students in predominantly white campuses do not recognize the role that culture and community play in their own development and world view. To the extent that the importance of culture is recognized it is usually confused with individual notions of personality. In brief, we have suggested the following process as a means for understanding the failure of current approaches to presenting the Other.

1. Culture is the basis for how the Other is presented and understood.
2. For white students the salient difference between them and the other is culture.
3. White students see themselves as healthy and successful individual human beings (vis-a-vis the Other).
4. Since they (white students) are okay and the Other is not, culture becomes a deviant trait.

The key to the Other's redemption is to let go of cultural identity. Culture is reaffirmed as something that denies individuality and health.

The denial of the culture of the Other is to deny the Other which leads to the denial of the self. This denial is, in part, governed by the recognition that the honoring of the Other inevitably means the disappearance of the primacy of the "I". Yet, we hold firmly to the notion of the "I" knowing it leads to "eclecticism and comparatism, the capacity to love everything a little, flaccidly sympathizing with each option without ever embracing any" (Toporov, 1984, p. 251).

In a recent presentation, Theresa Perry (1990) asked if within the diverse classroom context becomes text. The effect of diversity on the quality of classroom conversation has long been recognized as an important aspect of many universities' efforts to increase diversity in the

campus. Part of the issue of diversity is the issue of voice. This issue of voice is not merely an issue for campuses with minority students but for all campuses and for all students in search of a quality education. In fulfilling its role to "liberally educate students" the university has the responsibility to provide students with a broader sense of the idea of culture and diversity through confronting the question of alterity – that is how people learn to accept the Other. But our ability to openly discuss the Other is hampered both by the denial of culture by some students and the reliance on culture by others. Through this denial and reliance a co-dependency is developed which prevents authentic dialogue from occurring. We believe that one of the major obstacles to overcoming this co-dependency is a lack of acceptance among students that culture is a dialectical process in which every person engages, and is not a static process.

### **Conclusion**

The complexity of the world – often described in terms of race, culture, and ethnicity (and includes language, gender, and class) – can no longer be ignored. As educators we need to look no further than the shifting demographic composition of the public schools for evidence of this change. Yet, when we think of educating for a diverse society we seldom think about how the preparation of teachers in a non-diverse environment affects their ability to operate in a diverse classroom. Through this article we attempted to raise a few of the issues that we believe teacher preparation programs must begin to address in order to prepare their students for the classrooms of today. While our article focuses on the United States we firmly believe that the issues of learning to acknowledge the Other are relevant to the preparation of teachers in any country that is facing dramatic demographic shifts.

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{1} See Omi and Winant

{2} For a through review of current work on ethnic identity see: Phinney, J. S. "Ethnic Identity in Adolescents and Adults: Review of Research". *Psychology Bulletin*, 108(3) 499-514; Jiobu, R. M. (1988). *Ethnicity and Assimilation*; and Hill, R. F. (1980) *Exploring the Dimensions of Ethnicity: A study of status, culture and identity*.

{3} While the focus of this paper is on white students the author's recognize that there is a growing concern and literature on cultural denial among some black adolescents.